



Breaking Barriers: Oral Health Education for Transgender Wellness

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ABSTRACT

Transgender individuals often face unique challenges in various aspects of healthcare, including oral health. This article examines the unique oral health care needs of transgender individuals, along with the barriers they encounter and best practices for healthcare providers to ensure equitable and respectful care. By understanding these issues, providers can improve the overall health and well-being of transgender patients. Despite increased visibility, transgender individuals face social and health

disparities due to discrimination and a lack of culturally competent providers. These systemic inequalities and barriers significantly impact their oral health, highlighting the importance of educating providers and raising awareness to provide client-centered care.

Keywords

Gender dysphoria, Transgender, Transgender oral health, Gender identity development service, Discrimination, Oral health barriers, Oral health care

providers, Orthodontics

INTRODUCTION

Health, as per the World Health Organization (WHO), is complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not just the absence of disease. It's a fundamental right impacting our overall well-being, regardless of differences in race, religion, or social status. Oral health is vital, reflecting on our general health and quality of life. Poor oral health includes issues like dental caries, periodontal problems, and oral cancers, affecting overall systemic health. Healthcare is a human right for all, yet transgender individuals often struggle to access adequate oral and general healthcare.¹ "Transgender" covers a spectrum of identities, with diverse healthcare needs recognized globally. Education is key to equipping healthcare providers to offer respectful care to transgender individuals and integrating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+) and other awareness in medical training fosters understanding and inclusivity.² A supportive learning environment helps future professionals provide care that honors all patients' identities and experiences.³ Clinicians should focus on medically pertinent questions, avoid curiosity-driven inquiries, and apologize for mistakes regarding a patient's gender, pronouns, or "Transgender" or "gender nonconforming" refers to individuals whose gender identity does not align with their biological sex. This umbrella term encompasses a range of identities including transsexuals, cross-dressers, intersex individuals, and those who diverge from traditional gender norms.⁴ Known under various names globally like hijras in South Asia and Two-Spirit in North America, transgender communities have unique

healthcare needs that must be addressed for healthcare systems to be inclusive and equitable.⁵ Education is crucial for healthcare providers to deliver respectful and competent care to transgender individuals. Integrating LGBTQ+ awareness into medical training enhances understanding of gender diversity and specific healthcare needs.⁶ Facilities can promote inclusivity by offering gender-neutral restrooms, pairing patients with roommates who share their gender identity, and training staff in gender-affirming care. Gender is a spectrum, allowing for diverse identities, and many transgender individuals seek gender-affirming treatments like hormone therapy and surgery.⁷ In Canada, approximately 200,000 adults identify as transgender, constituting around 0.53% of the population, although this figure may be underreported. Despite increased visibility, transgender individuals face significant social and health disparities due to discrimination, stigmatization, and transphobia.⁸ Transgender individuals face numerous challenges, including higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, mental health issues, family rejection, abuse, and barriers to healthcare access.⁹ Oral health professionals often lack understanding of transgender experiences, which can impact oral health. Raising awareness is crucial to provide supportive care and recognize how discrimination and societal bias contribute to oral health issues like periodontal disease and temporomandibular pain.¹⁰ Addressing physical and psychological well-being is vital, considering the impact of mental health issues like depression and anxiety on oral health behaviors. To optimize oral health outcomes, inclusive practices are necessary. This involves training oral health professionals to be

sensitive to transgender clients' needs, ensuring access to affirming care, promoting community awareness about transgender health disparities, and integrating mental health support services into oral health care settings.¹¹ High-risk habits can lead to adverse oral health outcomes such as nicotine stomatitis, tooth loss, candidiasis, fibrosis, leukoplakia, and cancer.¹² Oral health professionals should consider the complex determinants affecting the transgender community's oral health. Though gender dysphoria isn't directly linked to oral health, indirect co morbidities exist. Transgender individuals, due to body dissatisfaction, may engage in harmful eating behaviors impacting enamel erosion and caries, necessitating understanding their prevalence.¹³ Gender-affirming hormone therapy, a key intervention in supporting gender transition, may affect oral health, with limited research showing potential alterations in bone density and increased risk of jaw fractures. Estrogen deficiency may be associated with osteoporosis and periodontal disease, though research is inconsistent. Fluctuating sex hormones can lead to hormone-influenced gingivitis, pyogenic granulomas, heightened risk of xerostomia, lichen planus, pemphigoid, Sjögren's syndrome, and burning mouth syndrome, akin to menopause.¹⁴

DISCUSSION

Defining transgender involves examining sex and gender. Traditional binary systems categorize sex (biological, based on sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones) and gender (psychological and social) into male/female and man/woman. Intersex individuals, born with mixed sex characteristics, represent a third sex category. Gender identity, one's internal sense of being male or female, often falls into binary categories

but can also include gender queer or transgender identities.¹⁵ The American Psychological Association notes that some people identify as both genders, neither, fluid, or embodying a third gender. Transgender individuals have a gender identity that differs from their assigned sex, while transsexual individuals seek physical alterations to align their bodies with their gender identity through surgery or hormone therapy.¹⁶ Psychologists recognize that gender is non-binary, encompassing a spectrum of identities. People outside the binary may experience confusion or anger. The American Psychological Association uses gender nonconforming (GNC) for those whose gender expression or identity deviates from societal norms, and TGNC for transgender or gender nonconforming individuals. Stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and violence significantly impact the health and well-being of TGNC people.¹⁷ Prejudicial attitudes towards transgender individuals often result in devaluation and hatred, particularly among males, those with high religiosity, certain political affiliations, and those with gender and sexual prejudice. Conversely, lower trans prejudice is linked to less knowledge about transgender people, taking human sexuality or gender courses, and having minimal contact with transgender individuals.¹⁸ The literature highlights several key points for oral health care professionals: Gender is not binary. Professionals need to understand that gender exists on a spectrum. Transgender identity is not a mental disorder. Identifying as transgender should not be pathologized. Transgender individuals are at increased risk of discrimination, violence, anxiety, depression, suicidality, substance abuse, and sexually transmitted infections.¹⁹ Transgender individuals face significant

barriers to healthcare, including oral health care, due to their gender nonconformance and biases among healthcare providers. Stigmatization causes undue stress, impacting oral health. Providers should educate themselves on feminizing and masculinizing hormone therapy to better understand transgender clients' experiences.²⁰ Recurring themes negatively impacting transgender health include discrimination and lack of culturally competent care, encompassing structural, interpersonal, and individual factors. Stigmatization can lead to adverse health effects, and violence is prevalent, with about half of transgender individuals experiencing physical or sexual assault and 84% facing verbal harassment, especially people of color. Oral health professionals should screen for and address these risks.²¹ Mental health and substance abuse issues are significant, with transgender individuals reporting high levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidality; 41% report attempting suicide compared to 3.7% of the general population. These challenges correlate with risky behaviors such as sex work and substance abuse.²² Baghaie et al. highlight a higher prevalence of dental caries and periodontal disease among individuals with substance abuse disorders compared to the general population.²³ More research is necessary to understand the impact of substance use on the oral health of transgender clients. Access to adequate healthcare is a critical issue, as transgender individuals face obstacles such as lack of health insurance, denial of claims due to their transgender status, and high costs. High unemployment rates further hinder the acquisition of health insurance.²⁴ The most frequently cited barrier is the lack of knowledge and/or bias among providers against transgender persons. Low-income transgender

individuals and transgender people of color report higher instances of discrimination when seeking appropriate healthcare.²⁵ Discrimination against transgender populations leads to heightened stress levels, contributing to various health conditions including periodontal disease. Stress, recognized by the American Academy of Periodontology, increases the risk of other conditions like aphthous stomatitis and bruxism. Nearly half of transgender individuals experience depression or anxiety due to discrimination, leading to dental fear and avoidance of healthcare.²⁶ Stigma prompts risky behaviors such as unsafe sex, exacerbating negative health outcomes like sexually transmitted infections. Risky sexual behaviors and unsafe needle practices further elevate the risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections among transgender individuals. Oral health professionals should be aware of the oral manifestations of certain Sexually Transmitted Infections like gonorrhea, and the lack of awareness among clients regarding their Sexually Transmitted Infections status poses transmission risks and impedes necessary care.²⁷ Doctors use hormone therapy to feminize or masculinize physical features. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) recommends the following criteria before starting hormone therapy: Persistent, well-documented gender dysphoria, capacity for fully informed decision-making and consent to treatment, and meeting the age of majority in a given country.²⁸ Feminizing hormone therapy aims to develop female secondary sex characteristics and diminish male ones. It combines estrogen, responsible for female traits, with an androgen blocker to counteract male hormones.²⁹ Progestogens may also be used, though their efficacy

lacks scientific evidence and relies on anecdotal reports. For masculinizing hormone therapy, testosterone is typically administered via various parenteral routes. Spironolactone is commonly used as an androgen blocker in the United States, while cyproterone acetate is preferred in Europe. Estradiol, a form of estrogen, is the primary class of estrogen used and can be administered orally, intramuscularly, or transdermally.³⁰ Several considerations are crucial when initiating hormone therapy. When delivering dental care to transgender and nonbinary patients undergoing gender-affirming treatment, several considerations are crucial. Employ inclusive language and respectful communication to address patients according to their affirmed gender identity. Collect thorough medical history, including details on hormone therapy and any associated medications, surgeries, or treatments.³¹ Offer personalized oral health education, covering potential oral health changes linked to hormone therapy, such as heightened risks of gum disease or dry mouth. Regularly assess oral health status, monitoring changes in gum health, bone density, and saliva production. Collaborate with other healthcare providers involved in the patient's gender-affirming care to ensure comprehensive and coordinated treatment. Foster a welcoming and supportive atmosphere where patients feel empowered to discuss their oral health concerns and any challenges they may encounter related to their gender identity.³² To effectively support transgender and nonbinary patients undergoing gender-affirming treatment, dental professionals must remain abreast of current guidelines and research in dental care for this population and seek opportunities for continuous

professional development.³³ Understanding the unique needs of transgender and nonbinary individuals in orthodontic care is paramount. This includes addressing specific orthodontic concerns and needs of these patients, as well as assessing the impact of hormone therapy on dental and orthodontic treatment outcomes. In providing orthodontic care to transgender and nonbinary patients, it is crucial to offer supportive and affirming care. This involves tailoring treatment plans to accommodate the patient's gender identity and expression preferences and ensuring clear communication and obtaining informed consent in alignment with their gender identity. Creating a welcoming and inclusive orthodontic practice environment is essential for transgender and non binary individuals, fostering a sense of comfort and safety during treatment.³⁴ Addressing concerns related to dental and facial aesthetics in alignment with the patient's gender identity is also vital. This may involve discussing options for orthodontic interventions that align with the patient's desired gender presentation. Additionally, offering ongoing support and follow-up care post-treatment ensures that any concerns or issues that may arise are addressed promptly and effectively. Cultural competence is key in providing respectful and affirming care to transgender and nonbinary patients. Dental professionals should continuously educate themselves to improve their understanding and care delivery for this patient population. Collaborating with other healthcare providers involved in gender-affirming care further enhances the comprehensive support provided to transgender and nonbinary individuals undergoing orthodontic treatment.³⁵

Research Gaps and Future Research Recommendation

There are significant gaps in understanding the oral health outcomes and experiences of transgender individuals. Research on the oral health implications of hormone therapies is limited, and studies on barriers to oral care and the inclusion of transgender content in dental education programs are scarce, often relying on broader medical literature. Future research should include diverse populations, such as the Canadian transgender community, as experiences vary widely based on cultural and psychosocial factors. Continued in-depth research is necessary to explore the oral health care experiences of transgender individuals. Future studies should focus on building scientific knowledge to enhance transgender-specific education and practices for oral health care providers. This includes addressing practitioner biases, approachability, and accessibility.³⁶ Employing various study designs, accessing diverse population samples, and using multiple data collection and analysis methods will be essential for a comprehensive understanding of these issues. Creating a supportive learning environment enables students to provide care that respects all patients' identities and experiences. Transgender individuals often experience gender dysphoria, a significant distress due to the mismatch between their assigned sex and gender identity. To alleviate this distress, some pursue gender-affirming treatments, including hormone therapy and surgery.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Transgender individuals face unique challenges in oral health care due to the effects of hormone therapy, surgical considerations, and psychological and social

factors. To provide effective and respectful care, dental professionals must be knowledgeable about these issues, create inclusive environments, and address specific oral health needs. By adopting best practices and fostering a supportive atmosphere, healthcare providers can significantly improve the oral health and overall well-being of transgender patients. Continued education and advocacy are essential to ensure that the oral health care needs of transgender individuals are met with compassion, competence, and respect.

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