



Oral Medical Care Coordination in the United States: Pillar #1 - Awareness

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Background

Oral medical care coordination seeks to improve public health outcomes by integrating oral health and primary care (see research brief 34 in this series for more information). While the evidence base on the benefits of oral medical care coordination is robust, less is known about current levels of adoption of coordinated systems in the United States. The University of Iowa conducted the seminal comprehensive literature review on this topic in 2018,¹ and, in 2021, KDHRC undertook a systematic effort to extend and update that research. We examined peer-reviewed articles, state oral health and chronic disease plans, and grey literature on oral medical care integration (see research brief 35 in this series).

From the systematic review, we further drilled down on key program characteristics that undergird success, replicability, or sustainability. These components are named as pillars in a framework of change required before oral medical care coordination can be meaningfully implemented on a broad scale. The pillars are **Awareness, Workforce Development and Operations, Information Exchange, and Payment**. This brief more deeply describes **Pillar #1: Awareness**. Additional briefs describe the other three pillars (see research briefs 37-39 in this series).

Awareness (pillar #1) defined

The **Awareness** pillar focuses on the importance of increasing recognition, knowledge, understanding, and perception about equitable, whole person coordinated care, as well as the oral-systemic connection across the lifespan. This pillar involves efforts to educate future and practicing health care providers, administrators, patients, and the public about the critical role of oral health in overall health and the benefits of integrated oral medical care coordination.

Key findings: Awareness

Key Themes

- Improving provider education and training
- Advocating for public awareness
- Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration
- Identifying and addressing institutional and systemic barriers

The literature reveals varying degrees of awareness and acceptance of oral medical care coordination among different types of providers currently in practice.^{2,3} In contrast, students in training expressed mostly positive attitudes toward interprofessional education requirements.^{4,5} The openness of a new generation of providers to oral medical care coordination is promising but tempered by the fact that school administrators reported little confidence in the current ability of medical faculty to teach students about oral medical care coordination because they lack time, knowledge and confidence to do so.^{4,5} Thus, a key conduit for systemic improvement will be to ensure that provider educators are equipped with ready-made tools and curricular materials to build awareness about the benefits of oral medical care coordination among providers-in training.

Many currently practicing providers recognize the connection between oral health and systemic conditions, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, but feel inadequately trained to address such co-occurring disorders in their practice.^{2,6} Oral health care providers may be more aware of the systemic implications of oral medical care coordination but may lack the confidence or authority to conduct medical screenings. However, studies have found that medical providers value such screenings for conditions such as hypertension or diabetes in an oral health setting and that patients were likewise open to such screenings.⁷ Having dental providers screen for hypertension offers a “low-lift” approach to begin oral medical care coordination on a widespread scale.

Public awareness and acceptance of coordinated care are also important for the successful implementation of oral medical care coordination. While patients are open to medical screenings in an oral health setting, they are more reluctant to receive oral health screenings in a medical setting. This is perhaps due to the historical separation of oral health from overall medical care, and it may also reflect embarrassment discussing oral health issues with medical providers.⁸

Public understanding of the connection between oral health and overall health can significantly influence acceptance and use of coordinated care services. Patients tend to have more positive perceptions of oral medical care coordination when they understand the benefits of it and positive perceptions lead patients to seek out integrated treatment in turn.^{8,9} However, there is a substantial gap in public awareness about the importance of oral health as it relates to overall physical health. Public awareness-raising campaigns focusing on time-savings and holistic health benefits are needed as a foundation for oral medical care coordination to succeed.

Recommendations

As foreshadowed above, awareness raising to promote oral medical care coordination must occur on multiple levels to undergird successful growth of the care model. As a specific strategy for high-impact awareness raising, the literature points to the pivotal role of interprofessional education (IPE) in cultivating positive attitudes and readiness for oral medical care coordination among providers.¹⁰ Studies consistently show that trainees and active providers who receive IPE are more likely to appreciate the importance of coordinated care and to collaborate effectively across disciplines.^{11,12}

Enhancing knowledge and understanding of the oral-systemic health connection is fundamental to transforming provider attitudes and behaviors and encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration.

Awareness-raising among the institutions training future providers is a critical first step to reduce institutional and systemic barriers for coordinated care among providers. Training and resources for administrators about the benefits of and best practices in coordinated care, with a heavy emphasis on cost-savings and provider excellence, will lay the foundation for more widespread acceptance of the model.

Providers can be informed via professional training, peer-reviewed articles, information from trusted organizations, practice guides, and conferences. Best practices for provider education include emphasizing:

- An understanding and appreciation of the role of different types of health providers
- The interrelationship between oral health, chronic diseases, and overall health across the lifespan
- Advantages of coordinated care including improvements in the quality of care, reduction of medical errors, and improved health outcomes
- Associations between oral health and other systemic conditions (e.g., smoking, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, or chemotherapy)
- Clinical recommendations, policies, and screening guidelines for common chronic diseases and their connections to oral health, including tailored guidance for specific populations (e.g., pediatric patients, pregnant women, or patients with cancer)
- Cost savings associated with coordinated screenings in the oral or medical health setting

Finally, **targeted public awareness campaigns** to inform the public about the connection between oral and systemic health, can emphasize the benefits of coordinated care and create demand for providers and institutions offering this care model. Key points for public awareness include highlighting:

- The relationship between oral health and conditions such as dental caries and medical conditions such as pneumonia, stroke, or infections
- The role of oral hygiene and importance of preventive oral health care (including fluoride)
- Key risk factors for poor oral health

Conclusion

The coordination of oral and medical health care services has the potential to significantly reshape the landscape of health care delivery by breaking down traditional barriers and focusing on more comprehensive, patient-centered care. **Awareness** is critical to this work, to ensure that administrators, providers, and the general public are all informed about key aspects of oral medical care coordination including why it matters and how it can benefit patients. Increasing awareness is an essential component to achieving the vision of fully coordinated care and must be achieved among all stakeholders with a common message and clear action items.

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