

Integrating Dental Therapists and Pediatric Services - Case Study Summaries and Best Practices

This brief summarizes dental therapist work with children in three Minnesota settings – a large statewide nonprofit dental practice, an urban safety net medical center and a Federally Qualified Health Center.

Nonprofit Dental Provider Case Study Summary

Apple Tree Dental, a large statewide nonprofit dental provider, has partnered with North Metro Pediatrics since January 2018. Apple Tree provides comprehensive dental services including exams, x-rays, cleanings, fillings and extractions. North Metro Pediatrics is a suburban non-profit pediatric medical clinic staffed by five pediatric nurse practitioners and related ancillary staff. North Metro Pediatrics communicates to families that they are able to combine their well child visits with preventive and/or restorative dental care.

Using Apple Tree’s mobile dental office equipment, the dental therapist¹ generally sees children before or after their well child medical visit. She performs cleanings, radiographs, exams, sealants, silver diamine fluoride and restorative care. If they are a new patient to Apple Tree, she is able to do an assessment and gather info for her collaborating dentist to do a teledentistry comprehensive exam. If children need nitrous oxide, they are generally scheduled with this dental therapist at Apple Tree’s nearby clinic. If they need referrals for care outside of the dental therapist’s scope, she is able to make an internal referral to a staff dentist or an external referral to a specialist.

This integrated care model reduces travel time, the amount of time a parent is away from work and the amount of time a child is away from school. The dental therapist reports that parents are extremely excited and appreciative to have their medical and dental needs completed at one location.

Safety Net Medical Center Case Study Summary

Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC) in Minneapolis is a large urban safety net hospital, teaching hospital and level one adult/pediatric trauma center with a wide range of outpatient and specialty clinics. In HCMC’s Obstetrics clinic, two dually licensed dental hygienist /dental therapists work to improve services to low-income pregnant women who have substantial dental care needs during pregnancy. As part of their training, dental residents provide new patient exams and treatment planning, and the dental therapists work with the dental residents and collaborating dentists to complete the treatment plan. Besides those affiliated directly with the dental clinic, the dental therapists collaborate with other advance practice providers in the hospital (physician assistants, nurse practitioners), along with nursing staff, physicians and a variety of language interpreters. The dental therapists refer more advanced dental procedures to dentists or specialists.

This “Bright Start Maternal Oral Health Care Program” provides many pregnant women their first dental experience. These professionals use their dental hygiene and advanced dental therapy scopes of practice to provide both primary and secondary prevention and treat the whole patient. Previously, this pregnant population at HCMC would receive a full complement of dental hygiene care, but only the patients’ most emergent dental needs were addressed due to limited access within the hospital’s dental clinic. Some of these pregnant women were previously sent to the emergency department for care. Now patients are having their treatment plans completed.

¹ Unlike other states, Minnesota law establishes two levels of dental therapy provider - a licensed dental therapist, and after a dental therapist works 2,000 hours and completes additional review and examination, a certified advanced dental therapist. Advanced dental therapists may work under general supervision and have a somewhat broader scope of practice. The providers featured in this brief are all advanced dental therapists.

Dental therapists also practice in the hospital's Coordinated Care Clinic for patients with complex health issues and/or who are homeless. In the Coordinated Care Clinic, a dental operatory has been integrated for easier access to dental care for this patient population.

Federally Qualified Health Center Case Study Summary

Community University Health Care Center (CUHCC), a Federally Qualified Health Center in Minneapolis with both medical and dental services, has employed dental therapists since 2012. CUHCC employs internal medicine physicians, pediatric physicians/nurse practitioners and residents and has a very diverse clientele.

From 2013 – 2015, CUHCC's dental therapist attended well child checks with the clinic's pediatric nurse practitioner, during which she provided education, conducted an evaluation and applied fluoride varnish. She also asked parents if the child had a dental home, whether they knew that there were dental services at the clinic (many didn't), and she referred appropriate children for appointments with herself or other dental providers. She reviewed the nurse practitioner's schedule and patient charts in advance to identify which children were clinic dental patients or would benefit from clinic dental services. Following her time with each patient, she alerted the medical providers on the dental needs she identified so they could participate in assuring that follow-up would take place.

Best practices

Each example includes components that could be adopted elsewhere. In addition, the dental therapists responding offered the following suggestions:

- Provide dental therapists with an iPad or other tablet equipped with the dental software in use at the therapist's clinic to make efficient use of their time and establish a connection to the dental service for each patient.
- Develop a flow chart or other reminder system to prompt medical providers to involve a dental therapist in appointments, or add this step to existing flowcharts.
- In addition to seeing children, dental therapists can also productively be part of visits by pregnant women to their medical providers, as shown by the experience of Hennepin County Medical Center.
- Experience recommends it's best to provide dental care before vaccinations in combined medical/dental appointments for those children needing vaccinations.
- Revenue can be captured by billing for these services, including billing for dental hygiene services provided if the therapist is dually licensed. (Hygiene services often must be related to a dentist or therapist visit and charge to be recoverable.)

Sources:

Personal communications with Danae Seyffer, MDT, ADT, Community University Health Care Center and Heather Luebben, MS, ADT, Apple Tree Dental, July, 2019.

American Dental Hygienists Association (April 2019), Dental therapy as a role for dental hygienists, *ADHA Access*, 33 (4) 15-17

Minnesota Department of Health (2017) Dental Therapy Toolkit: A Resource for Potential Employers

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