

Challenges and Opportunities for Oral Health in Communities of Color

Minority Health Perspective by Hazel Harper, DDS, MPH
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Oral health care poses special challenges to American communities of color. As never before, we need innovative and creative partnerships between oral health professionals, and the consumers and communities they serve, to transform those challenges into opportunities.

The United States continues to experience a slow but profound shift in its demographics as communities of color increase in numbers and influence. The U.S. population grew by nearly 19 million people between 1990 and 1997, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, with approximately two thirds of this growth due to racial and ethnic minority populations.

If this population trend continues, we would need to triple the number of minority dentists in our health professions workforce by the year 2050, according to Murdoch and Hoque, writing in a 1998 issue of the *Journal of the American College of Dentistry*. But there are other facts and trends that should disturb us all.

The number of dental school graduates has declined between 1986 and 1997. Little has changed in numbers of African American and American Indian dental graduates in this last decade, and the number of Hispanic dental graduates peaked in 1990, then dropped significantly, according to the American Dental Association Survey Center.

Some 80 percent of Medicaid eligible children—who are disproportionately minority—do not receive preventive dental services, according to a 1996 report of the HHS Inspector General. Other measures of minority oral health continue to shout for corrective action and greater public attention.

Public and private insurance combined still cover just half of U.S. dental care expenditures, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. So increases in employment and socioeconomic economic status among minority populations—which still lag the U.S. national rates—do not automatically translate into improved dental coverage and access to care.

These factors have translated into poor oral health status among American communities of color.

Consumers deserve quality care. Providers deserve fair and equitable compensation. Patients and providers must always have options and the right to choose. Patients should have access to managed care organizations that provide education, outreach, preventive services, quality care, and a broad scope of services. Compromises in the standards of care are unacceptable.

There is much to do. We must make a firm commitment to eliminating the health disparities caused by differences in education, employment, income, and wealth, as well as by racism and access to care. We must improve the ratio of minority dentists to minority patients by recruiting and retaining more minorities into the profession. We must encourage providers to serve in areas where they are needed most. We must measure the success of our health delivery system in terms of health outcomes and patient satisfaction rather than merely profit margins. We must hold up high standards of care, and high goals for success. And we must focus on patients' rights, human rights, and civil rights.

The National Dental Association (NDA) is dedicated to improving the oral health of all Americans, with special emphasis on the underserved. The NDA embraces the philosophy that health care is a right, not a privilege. As such, the NDA is dedicated to serving as advocates in the legislative arena and private sector in order to increase access to care in communities of color.

The NDA's mission is to enhance the skills of its members, recruit underrepresented minorities into the profession, and create opportunities for research between its members and the communities they serve. As an organization, the NDA knows that many of today's concerns will follow us into the next century.

Members of the NDA are not just clinical practitioners; they are active members in their communities. They can give training sessions on ways to prevent oral diseases, participate in career counseling programs, and assist in regional and local efforts to recruit minorities into health careers.

If you need help in developing and/or carrying out a dental program, contact your neighborhood dentist or the NDA, 3517 16th St, NW, Washington, DC, 20010, 202-588-1697. Dr. Harper is past president of the National Dental Association. ❖

