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Expanding the Oral Health Workforce: Integration of Oral Health Curriculum in Physician Assistant (PA) Education

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Objectives:

Describe the impact of a national initiative (The National Initiative on Oral Health, NIIOH) whose purpose is to expand the oral health workforce by preparing future clinicians to work in interprofessional teams that foster medical-dental collaboration and shared patient management

Describe the growth and distribution of oral health curriculum within PA education programs

Describe program integration strategies, barriers and facilitators of change

Methods:

A link to a web-based survey, requiring between five and ten minutes to complete, was sent by email to 182 directors of all accredited PA education programs. The survey used skip-logic design, branching respondents based on inclusion or not of oral health curriculum. Questions included pre-defined response options, as well as some questions that included an "other" response that allowed the respondent to describe the meaning of other in narrative form. Three additional open-ended questions solicited narrative comments. Survey response rate was 68.7% (n = 125). SPSS was used to analyze responses which were primarily frequencies and cross tabulations.

Findings:

Compared to a similar baseline study conducted in 2008, there is greater inclusion of oral health curriculum in 2014, with a majority of responding PA education programs (78.4%) indicating that their curriculum included specific curriculum on oral health and oral disease. A variety of teaching strategies were used to instruct students about oral health, with PA programs commonly integrating instruction into existing subject areas (72.4%). More than half (53.1%) of PA programs provided instruction in oral health to students in stand-alone lectures. About one-third (31.6%) of programs had students access an online oral health curriculum and 22.4% indicated that their students participated in interprofessional training opportunities to learn about oral health.

Conclusions:

Stakeholder strategies to engage PA programs in integrating oral health education appear to have resulted in wider availability of PA training in oral health promotion and prevention services. In addition, there was significant depth in oral health content across these programs with broad integration of oral health topics across a comprehensive range of subject areas. The survey also suggested new strategies to increase the number of programs integrating oral health curriculum. According to the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant, There are currently 61 new PA programs are under development in the United States. International growth of the profession is also expanding. This creates opportunities to educate the next generation of non-dental providers for new roles in an expanded oral health workforce that is focused on prevention, eradication of dental disease and reducing oral health disparities.