

Oral Health

Oral Health Care in Worcester: From the Dental Perspective

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“REMEMBER TO BRUSH AND FLOSS YOUR TEETH!” this farewell from your dentist might be a well-worn joke, but in the era of COVID-19 it is worth giving deeper consideration to the sentiment. Over the past six months, daily life has been turned upside down and routines we’ve long taken for granted are no longer recognizable. During these stressful times, it’s important to remember that oral health is an essential component of both physical and mental well-being. Studies have repeatedly shown the relationship between tooth decay and gum disease with broader illnesses, such as diabetes and heart disease. At the same time, lack of confidence in one’s smile can undermine self-esteem and further exacerbate other stressors.

I bring this up because a national spike in cracked teeth from “pandemic stress” has made front page news across media outlets, from CNN to Fox News, and dental office closures this spring led many to miss cleanings and checkups. My colleagues and I can attest that we have seen this phenomenon firsthand and are concerned about the ongoing impacts these stressors and disruptions are likely to have as we head into winter.

It’s within this context that the Worcester District Dental Society (WDDS), an association of area dentists, has doubled down on its efforts to promote and enable top class oral health in the local community. WDDS draws from Worcester and surrounding towns, creating a formal vehicle for providers to support oral health initiatives and contribute lessons learned. On a broader scale, WDDS is a component society of the Massachusetts Dental Society - founded in 1856 - which now includes nearly 5,000 Massachusetts dentists, and connects nationally to the American Dental Association.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the WDDS has pivoted to support both members and the community. In the beginning of the crisis, WDDS coordinated a drop-off point for local dentists to donate much-needed personal protective equipment to the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) for distribution to hospitals and healthcare

providers in need. Local dentists turned out their supply closets to give thousands of masks, gloves, gowns, and cleaning products to frontline healthcare workers grappling with the virus in those days of uncertainty. In turn, as supply levels stabilized, the WDDS has ensured that area dentists have had access to the protective equipment needed to continue providing essential oral health care to local communities. The dentists in this district have shown immediate adaptation to telemedicine during the pandemic. In-person meetings may have changed to Zoom, but the desire to help one another and our patients remains the same.

Outside of COVID-19, these networks align resources and initiatives that benefit the local community and expand care for those in need. WDDS and its members collaborate closely with other area oral health organizations, including the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences dental departments and the Quinsigamond Community College dental clinic. Whether providing scholarships for promising students or enabling training opportunities for the next generation of healthcare providers in our community, WDDS has been invested in ensuring that Massachusetts remains at the leading edge of oral healthcare in the country.

In line with this objective, expanding oral healthcare availability continues to be a cornerstone of WDDS’ important work. Society members helped lead the expansion of dental chairs in local federally qualified health centers, creating more opportunity for treatment. There are two community health centers in the Worcester district that provide comprehensive dental care (Dr. Genna’s article covers the Edward M. Kennedy Dental Center). The Family Health Center in Worcester now has 13 chairs and their clinic in Southbridge has four chairs. Lastly, there is a satellite Tufts dental clinic, in Worcester, that provides care to the disabled.

Similarly, WDDS views school-based care as a unique opportunity to broaden access to oral health education and screening. Before COVID-19 hit, the Family Health Center also went into the city schools for care. Year after year, WDDS continues to organize continuing education programs for the local dentists and conducts social events to bring the general dentists and specialty dentists of the district together.

In the pre-COVID-19 era, nearly 75%¹ of adults in Massachusetts visited the dentist in a given year and Massachusetts consistently had one of the highest numbers of dentists per capita.² These numbers partially reflect the hard work done by providers to increase access to care. Still, work remains to be done to sustain and even further improve the oral condition of Massachusetts residents, particularly given the societal upheaval that has taken place this year.

WDDS remains committed to its community, and to partnering with like-minded healthcare providers to drive positive outcomes for residents. So, remember to brush and floss your teeth! +

REFERENCES:

1. 2017 Massachusetts State Health Assessment www.mass.gov/dph
2. America Dental Association/Health Policy Institute 2020 <https://www.ada.org/en/science-research/health-policy-institute/dental-statistics/workforce>

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