

Dental Practice with Native Underserved: Sources of Satisfaction

Joseph P. Kelly

Background: Significant and increasing dental health care need is well documented among the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) underserved population. Likewise, study of the expanding demand for dentists in underserved areas demonstrates an increasingly inadequate workforce. This deficit of dental providers is a significant barrier to dental care of the underserved. Though numerous studies have amassed data regarding dental providers' reasons for not participating in or leaving programs for the underserved, little work has been done to identify and analyze factors surrounding the experience and satisfaction of the those dentists that intend to continue working in such areas. This study presents preliminary results of a cross-sectional study of dentists who have chosen to practice in native communities. Exploration of the results of this type of study could potentially contribute to recruitment, retention and support methods for dental providers, ultimately addressing an important source of dental care disparity among the underserved.

Purpose: The subjects of this proposed study, dentists who serve American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities, work in some of the most demanding settings in the nation, while meeting some of the greatest need. Identification of factors contributing to their longevity will not only provide insight into means to empower and effectively support these dental providers, but will also enlighten the career guidance of dental professionals and students possessing similar characteristics. Identification and exploration of these survey findings will add a critical component to the body of research that seeks to uncover lasting answers to the dental workforce crisis for the underserved.

Specific Aims: This study will identify the characteristics of those dentists presently serving the AI/AN population, determine the proportion intending to remain in such service and investigate the association of individual and environmental factors with the decision to continue in this dental career path. In addition, this study will look at individual factors associated with the initial decision to serve this population. Next, this study will explore associations of individual factors of these dentists and his or her workplace environmental factors with their choice to remain or leave AI/AN dentistry in relation to: perception of their experience, professional job satisfaction, attitudes toward providing dental care for the underserved, and satisfaction with life.

Methods: A 98-item comprehensive cross sectional survey was mailed to all full-time and part-time dentists who were listed in the most current version of the Indian Health Services Directory as providing clinical dental care to American Indian/Alaska Native persons in 2005.

Results: 351 usable surveys were returned from 525 potential respondents for an adjusted response rate of 66.9%. Data analysis is ongoing with preliminary results anticipated in June 2006.

Thesis Committee:

Christine Riedy, PhD, MPH (Chair)
Colleen E. Huebner, PhD, MPH
Wendy E. Mouradian, MD, MS
Doug Schaad, PhD

Partial Support Provided by:

U.S. DHHS, HRSA, Maternal and Child Health Bureau:
Maternal and Child Health Program Grant # T76MC00011-21-00
Center for Leadership Training in Pediatric Dentistry Grant # 1T17MC00020-01

U.S. DHHS, HRSA, DSCPH, Bureau of Health Professions:
"Enhancing Health Care in Western Washington's Rural Areas" Grant # 1D36HP10027

University of Washington Department of Pediatric Dentistry