Reducing Dentally-Related Emergency Room Visits in Alachua County, Florida: A Pilot Study

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Background: Due to financial barriers, limited participation by Medicaid dentists, and health literacy issues, low-income individuals covered by Medicaid and uninsured individuals are faced with increasing difficulty in accessing dental care. Subsequently, a high number of these individuals seek dental services at hospital emergency rooms. However, emergency rooms are not appropriate places for dental care.

Specific Aims: This pilot study focused on three specific aims:
1) Find self-reported differences in dental care utilization for patients who seek dental services at the ER.
2) Determine the reasons why patients seek dental care in a hospital emergency room.
3) Assess levels of health literacy among patients who seek emergency dental services.

Methods: A 38-item telephone survey was completed by adults (n = 10), aged 24-69 years old, who presented to the UF Health Shands Hospital emergency room within the preceding year (January 1, 2013 – December 31, 2013) for a dentally-related problem. The survey administered included four domains: patient related dental care, reasons for emergency room use, health literacy, and demographics.

Results: Among this population, only 20% had a general dentist. Furthermore, it was found that convenience was the primary factor for emergency room use while health literacy varied among the individuals of this study.

Conclusions: While this pilot study is still ongoing, the data collected from this survey will allow for better understanding of the patients who seek dental services at the emergency room. Therefore, future projects may be established to reduce dentally-related emergency room visits and thus improve dental care among this vulnerable population.