

DENTISTRY AND DISABILITY: A REALITY WE ALL NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE



Arrillaga Daniel Antonio
ATLAS
202319372@viep.com.mx

Equitable access to healthcare is a fundamental right, and the field of stomatology should be no exception. Nevertheless, however, in daily practice, it is evident that many people with disabilities face barriers that restrict their access to oral healthcare. This situation compromises not only human dignity but also their overall health, as oral health is not merely an aesthetic matter but a fundamental pillar of general health. For this reason, interdisciplinary teams and well-trained professionals are essential to address the diverse needs of stomatological care.

The importance of oral health in people with disabilities as a fundamental pillar of integral well-being

Oral conditions such as periodontal diseases, untreated cavities, or dental infections can, beyond causing pain, affect other organs and systems, leading to cardiovascular diseases, malnutrition, or even sepsis. For people with disabilities, these conditions can exacerbate existing health issues, further reducing their quality of life and life expectancy. Additionally, poor oral health can hinder social inclusion and full personal development. Accessible, specialized, and empathetic stomatological care provided by well-trained professionals to address the needs of individuals with disabilities would serve as a key pillar in promoting holistic well-being for this vulnerable population.

Challenges of the disabled population

People with disabilities often face significant limitations or lack the motor skills needed to maintain proper oral hygiene. Some disabilities can impact the correct development of the orofacial region and dental eruption, deteriorating oral functions and reducing their quality of life. Additionally, the use of certain medications can lead to xerostomia or imbalances in the oral microbiota, exposing them to a higher number of risk factors.

The stigmatization of this population, coupled with the hesitation of oral health professionals who may feel unprepared to care for patients with specific needs, creates significant challenges for those seeking the timely, appropriate, and respectful care they deserve. Furthermore, financial barriers faced by many Mexican families, often resulting from insufficient or poorly distributed government programs, further exacerbate the issue. It is therefore essential to ensure inclusive access to care and work to reduce barriers for a population that already faces numerous obstacles in their daily lives.

Patient's family role in oral health care

The relationship between individuals with disabilities and their families should not be underestimated, as their daily care, along with the collaboration of dentists, is undoubtedly a significant step toward improving their quality of life. However, some families or caregivers may not recognize the importance of oral health for this group, which often delays or prevents them from receiving appropriate care.

Nonetheless, the daily involvement of caregivers is crucial in these cases, as maintaining oral hygiene for this group is often not an easy task and can be more complex. It is also essential that caregivers receive proper guidance from professionals on how to improve the oral health of the patient's well-being.

Towards holistic stomatological care

Transforming the reality we know today requires concrete, innovative, and coordinated actions, alongside education. A specialized education that incorporates diverse approaches for treating patients with disabilities, alternative therapies, and the promotion of sign language to enhance communication and foster empathy with our patients. Additionally, implementing accessible campaigns for caregivers and family members, and adapting information to diverse needs, is essential, as preventive medicine helps reduce the necessity for future invasive interventions.

Besides these strategies, it is essential to have interdisciplinary collaboration with other healthcare professionals to provide holistic care and deliver timely, personalized treatment based on each patient's needs. This approach helps overcome barriers and fosters a positive experience in oral health, as many individuals are often discouraged by hearing negative experiences or receiving inadequate care from professionals. In addition, it is imperative that disabled patients feel comfortable, about proper access like ramps, wide doors, and inclusive areas for limited mobility/wheelchairs. These strategies can guarantee effective and dignified oral health, with a mission of improving significantly disabled patients's quality of life.

Conclusion

Taking care of oral health is not just an aesthetic concern but a fundamental pillar of overall health, particularly for disabled patients. Ignoring it compromises not only physical function and well-being but also self-esteem and social inclusion within this vulnerable population. Ensuring accessible, adequate care for people with disabilities promotes equity and dignified health, enabling them to smile without barriers. Every preventive intervention and empathetic treatment represents a step toward a more inclusive healthcare system.

Oral health care goes far beyond clean teeth; it reflects a well-cared-for and healthy life. By taking action toward comprehensive and inclusive care for our patients with disabilities and looking beyond barriers, we not only transform smiles, we transform lives. How deep is our commitment to that transformation?