

# Oral Health Needs of Wisconsin's Seniors: Dental Therapists Can Help



*“The burden of oral disease among adults age 65 and older is significant. Efforts to address the needs of this growing population will require system-level changes to improve access to oral health services and a multi-pronged approach, with changes implemented by the state and federal government, nursing homes and dental providers.” – Wisconsin Department of Health Services (2016)*

## The Burden of Oral Health Disease

- Nationally, at least 30% of low-income seniors (under 200% of federal poverty level, or \$33,000 for a family of two) have untreated decay, more than twice the rate of their higher-income peers.<sup>i</sup>
  - In Wisconsin about 35% of seniors live below 200% of the federal poverty line.<sup>ii</sup>
- More than 30% of Wisconsin seniors had at least 6 teeth removed because of tooth decay or gum disease.<sup>iii</sup>
- Nearly half of nursing home residents have untreated decay.<sup>iv</sup>
- One out of two nursing home residents with natural teeth have treatment needs.

## Challenges Accessing Care<sup>v</sup>

- In 2010 there were 777,500 seniors in Wisconsin, a number that is expected to double by 2040.
- Many seniors face challenges accessing dental care. They are more likely to face transportation and mobility challenges that make it difficult to travel to receive care.
- It is estimated that nearly 70% of seniors will need some form of long-term care in their lifetime (nursing homes, assisted living, adult day care, home care).

## How Dental Therapists Can Help

- Wisconsin can authorize **dental therapists**, like a physician assistant on a medical team, to provide cost-effective preventive and routine restorative care. Much of the consequences of dental disease --pain, eating difficulties, abscesses – are due to untreated decay. Under state law, only dentists can drill and fill cavities. By allowing dental therapists to practice, Wisconsin could increase the number of highly trained professionals able to perform this as well as many other basic procedures – all under the supervision of a dentist.
- Practices could deploy dental therapists to nursing homes, adult day centers, and other locations convenient to seniors, many of whom face challenges travelling to receive care. Because dental therapists are specialists in a limited number of procedures, their salaries are lower than that of dentists, which makes it more affordable for practices to send them to off-site locations.
- Apple Tree Dental, a non-profit multi-site practice in Minnesota, sends a dental team, including a dental therapist, to provide on-site care at a nursing home for veterans. The dental therapist provides 8-10 dental visits each day.<sup>vi</sup> The average employment costs per day for the dental therapist were \$222 less than for a dentist, totaling savings of \$52,000/year for Apple Tree by using a dental therapist instead of a dentist.

<sup>i</sup> Tomar, S. “Changes in Disparities in Dental Caries Status in the United States,” January 10, 2017. Unpublished analysis conducted for the Pew Charitable Trusts.

<sup>ii</sup> Cubanski, J. et. al. “How Many Seniors are Living in Poverty?” (March 2018) Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation Issue Brief.

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<sup>iii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Oral Health Data: Wisconsin, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealthdata/index.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Wisconsin Department of Health Services, “Wisconsin Healthy Smiles Survey: The Oral Health of Wisconsin’s Older Adults (2016 survey), available at <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p01121.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> Apple Tree Dental, “An Advanced Dental Therapist in Long-Term Care: A Case Study,” (2017), <http://www.appletreedental.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ADT-LTC-Case-Study-091517.pdf> .