

Are Dental School Websites in the United States a Consumer Resource for Oral Health?

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Introduction

Health literacy has been found to be one of the single best predictors of a patients' health status¹. Making oral health information, including educational materials, easily accessible to the public through websites affiliated with oral health organizations and dental schools is essential to improving the delivery of health-related information to the general population². Dental schools have a unique opportunity to disseminate effective, accurate oral health information online. The latest national survey done by the Pew Research Center found that seven-in-ten (72%) adult internet users have searched online for a range of information on health issues, most popularly for specific diseases and their treatments³. However, despite the potential role that dental schools play in educating the public about oral health, it is not clear whether dental school websites actually provide such educational information.

Objectives

The purpose of our research was to identify whether dental schools are a source of consumer oral health information.

Methods

Sixty-six accredited United States dental schools were identified based on the list of American Dental Association (ADA) Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) programs. The designated patient area of the website were systematically evaluated by two reviewers using the following criteria.

For each dental school website, patient resources were evaluated for the presence or absence of the following oral health information components:

- Patient educational materials
- Patient oral health services
- Explanation of patient oral health services

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, using STATA (StataCorp, Texas).

This study was reviewed by the IRB Committee and was exempt because of the absence of human subjects.

Results

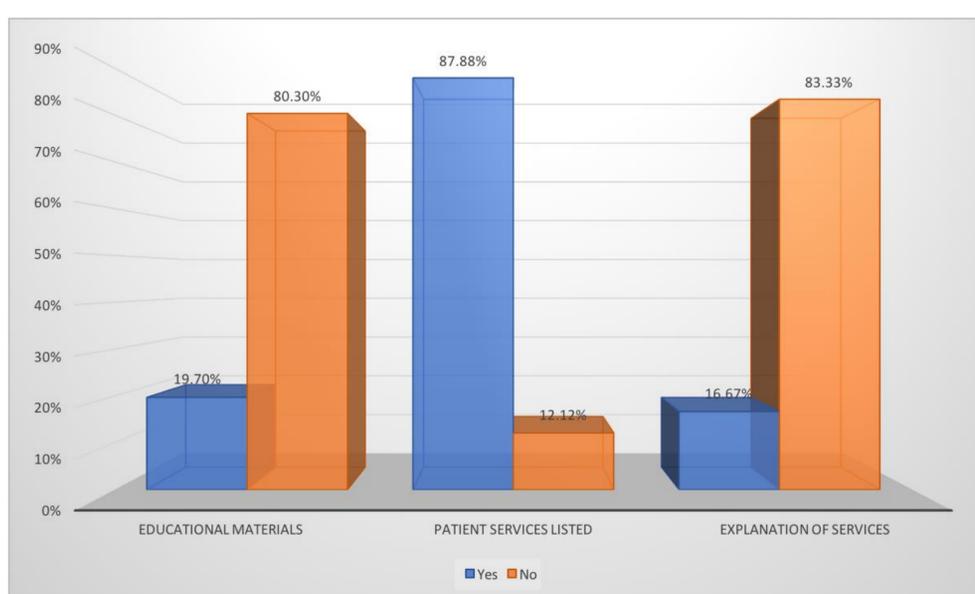


Fig 3. Oral health information provided on dental school websites

- 13 of 66 dental schools provided educational materials online for patients.
- 58 of 66 dental schools provided a simple list of the services provided by the student clinics.
- 11 of 66 dental schools provided an explanation of services listed.
- The simplest form of oral health information provided across all dental school websites is a list of patient oral health services.
- The majority of dental schools do not provide patient educational materials or an explanation of oral health services provided in the dental clinics.

Conclusions

Overall, dental schools provide very limited oral health information, including educational information for patients. Oral health information provided on dental school websites could be expanded from just directions to the schools clinics or the scheduling of appointments, to also include the dissemination of information on oral health topics. The trend in educational information that we found on the websites was towards pediatric health care and implant information. Next steps will be to analyze trends of educational material offered on dental school websites and the effectiveness of the materials. With current knowledge of the connection between health literacy and a patient's health status, it would be wise for dental schools to work towards tailoring health information delivery into a format patients can most easily access and understand.

References

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