

School Dental Health Services In Pakistan: A Challenging Situation

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A good oral health care is directly related to the general health of the entire body. The dental diseases are most common and widespread diseases around the world. But it is challenging for developing countries. One of the most common prevailing conditions is dental caries. It is progressive and cumulative in nature and becomes more complex with the advancing age. It can affect children's quality of life.¹ The low socioeconomic status factor in developing countries affects dental caries more than the developed countries.² The oral health status is observed differently in different social classes as well as in gender and the educational level of the parents.³ The prevalence of dental caries among school going children of different social class showed higher predilection of dental caries in government school children than private.³

Presence of decayed, missing teeth, bad breath and untreated dental caries may result in pain and swelling and restricts an individual's routine activities at school causing ample loss of productive working hours throughout the year.⁴ A study conducted in neighbouring country showed more than fifty million school hours are lost due to dental problems among school going children. The most common dental issues are dental caries and gingival diseases however trauma and dental defects are also of great clinical significance. Early tooth loss may affect the nutritional intake of a child which affects the growth and development.⁵ In Pakistan, the information about the burden of oral diseases are insufficient however, the issue of limited availability of care and unmet oral health needs is well documented. Curative dental services are available at primary health care level in Pakistan in only a few places, and cannot deal with the burden of oral cancer and tooth decay.⁴

In government sector hospitals practice of extracting tooth is higher than saving teeth. It may be due to shortage of staff or lack of availability of proper instrumentation and materials. Pakistan is 7th most populous country where dental diseases are highly prevalent because our large number of population reside in rural area where due to lack of school health services, hospital facility and inadequate resources the dental diseases have been known to be the fourth most high-priced disease to treat.^{4,6,7} Therefore the people of Pakistan are immensely burdened by dental problems.⁸ Hence oral health is given low priority and as a

consequence large population of Pakistan has untreated oral diseases.^{9,10} Special personal and government interventions are required to reduce the burden of dental problems among school children at primary care level.⁴ Parental knowledge about dental care is very important. Those parents who have lack of oral health knowledge and very low educational level has shown evidence that their children are having more dental problems because of lack of proper oral health guidance and care as compared to those parents having better education and adequate dental knowledge.^{11,12}

There is strong need for oral health promotion in schools. Oral disease can lead to pain and tooth loss, a condition that affects the appearance, quality of life, nutritional intake and consequently the growth and development of children. The cost of treating dental decay alone could easily exhaust a country's total health care budget for children.¹³ Many oral health problems are preventable and their early onset reversible. However, in several countries a considerable number of children, their parents and teachers have limited knowledge of the causes and prevention of oral diseases. The need for the promotion of oral health in schools is evident and it can easily be integrated into general health promotion, school curricula and activities. Children can be provided with skills that enable them to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Healthy behaviours and lifestyles developed at a young age are more sustainable. Messages can be reinforced throughout the school years.^{14,15}

It is recommend that the government should design a standard policy to take onboard various government and private institutions, dental community and pharmaceutical companies to highlight the dental issues especially on the prevention side, oral health promotion particularly on tooth decay and oral cancer. Poor oral health can have a detrimental effect on children's quality of life.

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