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## A Pilot Project To Facilitate Dental Care For Individuals With Disabilities

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### Background

The US Maternal and Child Health Bureau defines children with special health care needs (CSHCN) as “those who have or are at increased risk for a chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional condition and who also require health and related services of a type or amount beyond that required by children generally.” Nearly one in five children under 18 fits this definition. There is well-documented evidence that CSHCN face multiple obstacles in obtaining regular sources of dental care. These obstacles can be attributed to lack of trained providers, low insurance reimbursements, and patients’ physiological ability to tolerate the dental setting. Telehealth visits have been proposed to improve medical care for the CHSCN population. This study aims to determine the value of a “pre-dental checkup telehealth appointment”. We aim to evaluate 1) If families prefer to have a PDT and 2) if dental providers prefer to conduct a PDT before the clinical appointment.

### Findings

Based on the study findings and literature reviews, a telehealth visit before the initial dental visit helps reduce barriers to care for individuals with special healthcare needs. Findings show that the use of telehealth has improved access to care for individuals with special health care needs and helps improve communication for patients with barriers to care and medical conditions. An initial visit is implemented to understand these barriers to care and find ways to decrease them, and supporting evidence shows its can be used for diagnosis and comprehensive assessment. The telehealth visit provides the patient and provider with an opportunity to meet prior to the initial visit and discuss potential concerns during the visit.

### Abstract

This study aims to determine if initial telehealth visits prior to the first in-person dental appointment is beneficial in treating individuals with special healthcare needs by reducing barriers to access. Some of these barriers include cost, lack of providers, inaccessibility, and ability to tolerate dental treatment. Many dentists and healthcare providers have little or no training in treating individuals with disabilities. Many have insurance with low reimbursements, making it more difficult to find providers willing to treat. Offices are often not equipped to accommodate physical barriers, such as wheelchair accessibility. Some of these individuals have difficulty tolerating dental treatment. Alternatives to care in the office, such as nitrous oxide, sedation, or general anesthesia, is not provided by all offices. The telehealth appointment will obtain medical, dental, and social histories. It will also be used to gather information about the ability to tolerate treatment in the office, identify any physical barriers, and learn more about the patient and caregivers to increase the success of the first visit.

### Materials and Methods

This is a prospective pilot intervention. A pre-dental checkup telehealth appointment was completed within one week prior to the first visit. Study subjects include individuals with special healthcare needs 6 years of age and older and their caregivers. Patients who met the criteria were scheduled for a new patient examination, and the goal was to have 40 study subjects. Anyone under six years of age or individuals without special healthcare needs were excluded. Provider training included learning the scripted interviews and evaluations. Medical and dental history, and any possible barriers to care were identified during this appointment. This information was utilized in planning the first visit. Caregivers were asked to complete a survey over the phone, and providers will conduct it by email. All results were and changes were made as needed to enhance appointment success. All information remains HIPAA compliant. This will determine if pre-dental appointment telehealth visits enhance appointment success and decrease barriers to care.

Dental Telehealth Assessment Topics
Medical History
Medical conditions
Providers and specialists
Medications and allergies
Previous hospitalizations, surgeries, general anesthesia
Neurological or Cognitive Issues
Dental History and Oral Hygiene
Previous dental visit history
Use of adjuncts: nitrous oxide, papoose, protective stabilization, sedation, general anesthesia
Oral health and oral hygiene
History of pain, treatment, or urgent care
Dietary Status
Dietary restrictions
Diet history
Mouth or tube fed
Behavioral Evaluation
Behavioral characteristics
Fear and anxiety
Communication needs
Social history
Physical Evaluation
Mobility status and limitations
Wheelchair or walker use
Cognitive Evaluation
Interactions with caregivers, providers
Communication during visit
Cooperation
Special Needs
Physical, medical, sensory, or behavioral adaptations needed
Patient preferences
Specialists and referrals
Sensory sensitivity
Support System
Caregiver Information
Support staff involvement in dental visit
Discussion/Planning
Plans and goals for the appointments
Financial planning
Duration, timing and frequency of visits
Mutual expectations

### Use for Clinical Practice

The use of telehealth before the initial visit in hospitals, private practice, and academic institutions helps address the need to increase access to care for individuals with special healthcare needs. The visit addresses many of the concerns parents and caregivers have regarding the dental visit and has shown that it improves patient and provider experience. A telehealth visit helps understand some of the potential barriers and discuss them with the caregivers and patient, while also creating a welcoming environment. Findings have shown that the use of telehealth in combination with in-person care has improved the quality of and access to healthcare. Its use decreases healthcare disparities, improves the initial experience of the in-person dental visit, and provides comprehensive care.

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