

University of California
San Francisco



School of Dentistry

513 Parnassus Avenue
Box 0430
San Francisco, CA
94143-0430
tel: 415/476-1323
fax: 415/476-4226

Source: Cameron Heffernan; 415-502-7179

Email: heffernanc@dentistry.ucsf.edu

Web: <http://dentistry.ucsf.edu>

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DENTAL TREATMENT HIGHLY EFFECTIVE IN HELPING WELFARE RECIPIENTS GAIN EMPLOYMENT

Welfare recipients who received dental treatment demonstrated improved prospects of employment, in addition to extremely high quality of life improvements, according to the results of a study performed by researchers at the University of California, San Francisco School of Dentistry.

In the study, 377 welfare recipients who had been working cooperatively with their welfare social worker for at least three months, and who had been identified as needing extensive dental services were given rehabilitative dental treatment, including fillings, extractions and dentures. Of the 265 participants who completed treatment, 79 percent reported improved oral health-related quality of life in a post-treatment questionnaire. More importantly, those who completed their dental treatment were twice as likely to receive favorable or neutral employment outcomes as they were to receive unfavorable employment outcomes, in comparison to those who did not follow through with their treatment.

“Oral health researchers have long known that oral health disparities existed in some population groups, as classified by age, sex, income, and race/ethnicity,” said Susan Hyde, Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences at the UCSF School of Dentistry. “But the social impact of oral health on those marginalized through extended unemployment was unknown, prior to this study,” Hyde continued.

Researchers concluded that improved oral health can successfully eliminate many barriers to employment encountered by welfare recipients. “Participants who suffered from extremely poor oral health experienced pain as well as difficulty in eating and speaking. They lacked the social confidence to make a favorable impression at job interviews, for example, or suffered from low self-esteem due to their poor oral health. After treatment, they exhibited confidence and a positive outlook that translated well to potential employers,” Hyde continued.

According to Jane Weintraub, Lee Hysan Professor at the UCSF School of Dentistry, “Many jobs require interaction with the public. In our culture, employers may hesitate to hire someone with missing or badly decayed teeth. By providing dental treatment to this vulnerable but motivated group, barriers to employment were reduced.”

The study, funded by a grant from the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, was performed on 377 participants in the Personal Assisted Employment Services (PAES) Dental Program, offered by the San Francisco Department of Human Services. The PAES Dental Program began in 1999 as a collaborative pilot program between the San Francisco Departments of Human Services and Public Health, and is the only program of its kind in the nation. The goal of the program is to eliminate severe dental problems that pose a barrier to employment and self-sufficiency.

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