What are the most important clinical indicators in primary dental care?

A clinical minimum data set for primary dental care by R. S. Ireland, A. M. Jenner, M. J. Williams and M. Tickle
Br Dent J 2001; 190: 663-667

Objective

To achieve consensus within primary dental care on the contents of a clinical minimum data set to measure oral health status.

Design

Using the Delphi process a simple random sample of 30 LDCs and 10 CDS services in England were asked to rank a list of existing clinical indicators in order of their perceived importance as a means of measuring oral health. A nominated panel representing the stakeholder organisations of primary dental care reviewed this ranking and identified a core group of clinical indicators to be included in a clinical minimum data set.

Results

An 80 % response rate to the Delphi process was achieved. Consensus was reached on a core group of 10 indicators, which can provide information on patients' perceptions of pain, function and appearance, and professional measurements of caries, teeth present, periodontal disease, oral sepsis, presence of mucosal pathology and tooth wear.

Conclusions

A representative sample of primary care dentists in England and the key representative organisations of primary dental care achieved consensus on the contents of a clinical minimum data set to record oral health status in primary dental care. This is a first step in standardising the measurement of oral health status across primary care.

In brief

- Consensus has been achieved on the most important clinical indicators in primary dental care
- The minimum clinical data set can make an important contribution to audit and clinical governance
- The CMDS can be incorporated within existing clinical dental software systems
- The CMDS can provide a basis for clinical data transfer across the profession

Comment

With the advent of clinical governance, audit, and the personal dental service, never has it been more necessary to establish a reliable means for defining and measuring changes in oral health. This paper sets out to define criteria by which these may be assessed, with the ultimate goal of promoting excellence in dental care delivery attained.

This study strives to establish a minimum set of indicators which may be recorded easily and accurately at the chair-side, and incorporated into a modern clinical computer system to record and quantify oral health, and changes brought about over time. These principles are designed to be relevant to all branches of the profession, both NHS and private within the UK. For acceptance it was recognised that consensus and ease of application were paramount.

Clinicians working in all branches of primary care were asked to review and rank in order of importance a number of clinical indicators of oral health drawn from a number of established data sets in use both in the UK and in the rest of Europe. The clinicians drawn from the GDS, PDS and CDS ranked the importance of the indicators on a scale of 1 (low priority) to 9 (high priority). Using the Delphi process some indicators were promoted in importance and others demoted until consensus was achieved. From this it was possible to agree a core group of indicators and guidelines for the clinical recording of these indicators.

From the 38 clinical indicators derived from the review of existing data sets, a final set of 10 'core indicators' and 27 'additional indicators' were established, which could be used to measure the oral health of the nation. It was also agreed that these

indicators should be reviewed periodically and amended to fit changes within the population.

It was felt that this could prove to be the first step in standardising the measurement of oral health in primary dental care. The agreed CMDS therefore could become a tool allowing self-audit, and comparison of outcomes of treatment from practitioner to practitioner. By this method it is hoped that the quality of dental care may be promoted and improved, allowing the modification or discontinuation of sub optimal treatment interventions, and promoting sound evidence based quality procedures in primary dental care.

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