

## **Dental Care Access for Children with Special Health Care Needs - A Pilot Project at the Dental Department of BC Children's Hospital**

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**Objectives:** This pilot project, conducted at the Dental Department of BC Children's Hospital (DD-BCCH), aimed 1) to identify challenges encountered by caregivers obtaining dental care for their Child with Special Health Care Needs (CSHCN) and 2) to determine the caregiver's understanding of the oral health status of their child.

**Methods:** Caregivers of CSHCN who were patients of the DD-BCCH were recruited by letter and posted advertisement. Information on caregiver's perceptions of enabling factors and barriers to dental services and their understanding of their child's oral health status were collected using a pre-tested survey instrument. Demographic information, referral date and source, insurance coverage, medical diagnosis, chief dental complaint, and anticipated dental treatment were gathered from the child's dental record. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively and qualitative data was understood by thematic analysis.

**Results:** Common medical diagnoses for the sample of CSHCN (n=51) were developmental delay, seizure disorder, autism and cerebral palsy. Caregivers from mid-to-upper income levels formed 60% of the sample. Payment methods included private dental insurance (41%), government benefits (41%), or out-of-pocket funds (26%). Of the sample, 50% were referred by a medical specialist and 60% did not have a regular dental provider. About 50% of caregivers reported earlier barriers obtaining dental care: dentist not trained or comfortable treating or managing the behaviour of their child; complexity of child's medical condition; financial barriers; and challenges of wheel-chair access. For 86% of caregivers, their interpretation of their child's oral health status corresponded with the oral examination findings.

**Conclusions:** The complexity of the child's medical status, limited abilities of dental providers to deliver care and financial obstacles were commonly-reported barriers to care. The majority of caregivers in this study were well aware of their child unmet dental needs.

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