



Global Oral Health Perspective

Essential oral health care and universal health coverage go hand in hand

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Essential and universal are 2 contemporary buzzwords in global health, which also are used in discussions about oral health care and health policy in the United States and Canada. Essential care, essential medicines, and universal health coverage (UHC) are examples in which the 2 terms are used, but the exact meaning remains, at times, unclear or varies depending on the context. Both terms also feature prominently in the Global Strategy on Oral Health of the World Health Organization, which was approved in May 2022.¹ A clear understanding of what exactly is meant by these 2 words and, especially, how they relate to each other in the context of public and political debates around oral health services is necessary for meaningful discourse. This commentary tries to untangle the relationship between essential and universal in oral health care.

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines essential as something basic, necessary, indispensable or unavoidable.² The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that oral health care is essential for the health and well-being of people and populations and must be maintained even during a public health emergency. Dental problems do not stop in a pandemic; shutting down services can quickly exacerbate simple clinical diagnoses to major health problems and can affect daily life. Dental professional associations in many countries, including the United States, have advocated strongly

Oral health care is essential every day, with or without a pandemic.

for oral health care services to be recognized as part of essential health care services to avert complete shutdowns and service disruptions for patients. Of course, oral health care is essential every day, with or without a pandemic. However, even emergency oral health care services are often not considered essential health services, are deliberately excluded from insurance coverage for large parts of populations, or are not accessible for publicly insured patients.

Triggered by the debate around the essentiality of oral health care, a pragmatic definition of essential oral health care was proposed, covering “the most prevalent oral health problems through an agreed-on set of safe, quality, and cost-effective interventions at the individual and community level to promote and protect oral health, as well as prevent and treat common oral diseases, including appropriate rehabilitative services”³ (Figure).

A nonnegotiable element of essential oral health care is urgent oral health care, focusing on serious diseases and conditions that require immediate attention to avoid negative consequences for the patient, such as bleeding, infection, or pain. Everyone should have unrestricted access to urgent care. Additional elements of essential oral health care can include prevention, restorations, or low-complexity prosthetic care (depending on national or local priorities, the disease burden, and the resources and workforce available within the health care system). These factors can all be considered when defining the exact details of essential oral health care. The details are, therefore, variable, but the package of interventions should always respond to the needs of local populations. Advanced services, including specialist care, are generally not part of essential services, unless resources allow for their inclusion.

How does essential care relate to the concept of UHC? According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, universal relates to “including or covering all or a whole collectively or distributively without limit or exception.” The dictionary defines UHC as health care “available equitably to all

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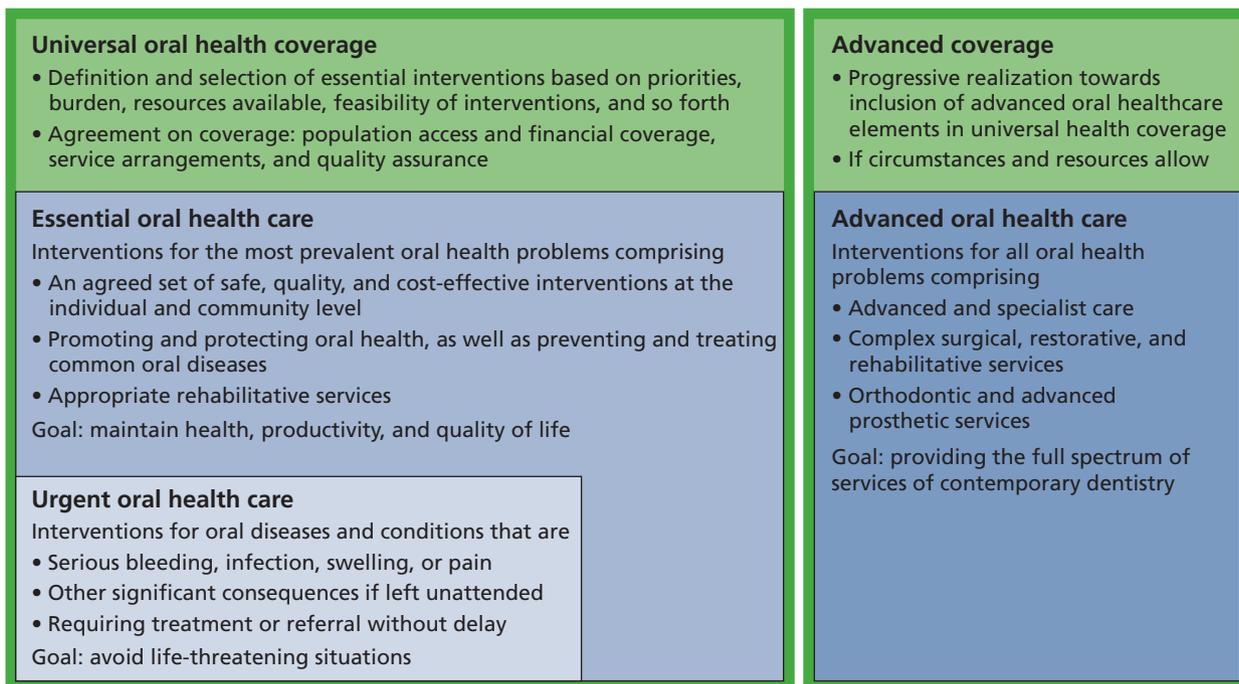


Figure. Universal oral health coverage and urgent, essential, and advanced oral health care.

members of a society.”⁴ The World Health Organization’s definition goes even further: “UHC means that all individuals and communities receive the health services they need without suffering financial hardship. It includes the full spectrum of essential, quality health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care across the life course.”⁵

The key words in this definition are essential, quality health services. Universal availability and access to essential and quality health services can be a realistic goal only when focusing on interventions for common problems and when using cost-effective evidence-based therapies, which are the core of essential oral health care. The full spectrum of advanced oral health care, on the contrary, encompasses the complete set of therapies that are part of contemporary dentistry, including specialist care, dental implants, or complex prosthetic care.

Critics sometimes deprecate UHC by stating that free oral health care for everyone is not realistic. Yet UHC for oral health neither implies free oral health care nor access to advanced oral health care. Instead, the concept calls for improved access to essential oral health care for everyone, without financial hardship. This may, as appropriate, include free or low-cost access for certain population groups with costs fully or partially covered through government funding, taxes, or insurance plans. If advanced or specialist oral health care is required, other benefit and access mechanisms may be added, or patient copayments may be increased. The fundamental principle, however, remains that the cost of essential oral health care should not be an access barrier nor a burden that increases the risk of poverty.

The fundamental concepts of essential health care and the need for their universal availability are thus closely connected. This leads to 3 insights:

1. Define what is essential. Essential oral health care should be defined through a structured and transparent process with involvement of communities and addressing their needs. If necessary and appropriate, essential interventions may differ for different populations or age groups.
2. Access to affordable oral health care is always necessary and essential. The broad agreement that oral health care is an indispensable part of essential health services in a pandemic situation must be extended as a fundamental necessity, irrespective of a pandemic situation.⁶
3. Make essential oral health care universally available. Everyone, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, insurance, or other characteristics should have access to affordable, essential oral health care.⁷

CONCLUSIONS

Essential oral health care and UHC go hand in hand but cannot be put in place overnight or at once. Concepts for progressive realization of UHC covering essential oral health care are available and may help in a stepwise implementation process.⁸ Expanding coverage to populations without or with limited access to oral health care requires low-threshold offers of affordable, essential oral health care. Accessing such services puts patients on a pathway toward more comprehensive care. The 50% of the world's population with untreated oral diseases are desperate for such a vision and eager to start their dental journey using essential, universally available oral health care. ■

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