Peel Oral Health: Where are we?
An assessment of the community we serve

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Background

Good oral health is more than a good-looking smile and white teeth. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines oral health as “a state of being free of mouth and facial pain, oral and throat cancer, oral infection and sores, periodontal disease and disorders that limit an individual’s capacity in biting, chewing, smiling, speaking and psychological wellbeing”\(^1\). Though oral health refers to the health of the oral cavity, dental health is specifically related to the health of the teeth and gums. Oral and dental disease presents in multiple forms such as periodontitis (gum disease), dental caries (tooth decay), oral cancer, oral lesions, and oral infectious diseases with dental caries and periodontitis in particular being the more prevalent forms seen \(^2^3\). Although highly preventable, if oral diseases are left untreated, it can lead to more severe conditions. Oral disease has in fact been linked to cardiovascular disease, cancers, diabetes and respiratory disease \(^2^3^4\).

Like many chronic diseases, oral diseases remain a public health concern in developed and developing countries alike \(^5^6\). Though there have been great achievements in oral health around the world, a lot still remains to be done especially for vulnerable groups in many communities who experience the highest dental needs \(^5^6\). Globally, dental caries has been shown to affect 60-90% of children with nearly 100% of adults having experienced dental caries in their lifetime \(^1\). The prevalence of untreated dental caries has been on the rise and has become the most common chronic condition worldwide out of 291 studied between 1990 and 2010 \(^2\). The impact of dental caries has been shown to have both social and economic costs with millions of school and work hours lost due to dental issues in any society, Canada inclusive \(^3^7\). This highlights the major burden oral disease poses on population health.

Oral health care delivery varies from country to country. In Canada, the model of oral health care delivery is predominantly private fee-for-service system with a few publicly delivered programs for some vulnerable groups (like children from low income families or adults on disability benefits, indigenous peoples, amongst others). These programs vary across provinces and territories \(^3^7\). In Ontario, oral health care has limited coverage under the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) – a plan that covers most fees associated with basic health care for residents of Ontario. With the exception of the provincially funded dental programs for the few, many residents who seek dental care have to pay either out-of-pocket or through employer-provided dental insurance benefits \(^4^7\). With the high cost associated with dental treatment, this serves as a barrier for yet other vulnerable groups- the poor, those unemployed, in precarious jobs with no dental insurance benefits amongst others. The impact of dental health insurance inequalities is significant, especially in a region like Peel, with a population of 1.4 million residents \(^8\) with a third employed in precarious jobs with no dental benefits \(^9\). Though the Region of Peel subsidizes dental care for seniors \(^10\), and adults and children in receipt of social assistance are able to access provincially-funded programs, there are yet gaps in dental coverage for low-income earning adults in Peel.
Introduction

As a community-centred health care organization in Peel, WellFort Community Health Services (WellFort) serves many of these vulnerable individuals in the community. At the centre, WellFort sees clients with diverse and multifaceted needs – some of which are dental related. Through WellFort’s dental clinic, Health n’ Smiles, children under the age of 18 living in under-resourced families or in the need of urgent care, and qualified seniors over the age of 65 can access dental care via the publicly funded dental programs. However, there are yet many in the community with dental needs WellFort is unable to cater for. Guided by the Community Health Centre (CHC) model of health and wellbeing – as currently being promoted by the provincial association, WellFort seeks to address barriers the community face in accessing health services; oral health services. This report aims to better understand the dental health needs our community members living in the Region of Peel and proffer solutions to address these needs.

Oral Health Assessment- Methodology and findings

An oral health assessment was done via a focus group discussion and survey to identify the dental health needs in the Peel area.

The aim of the focus group discussion was to understand the barriers community members face in accessing oral health services. The discussion had 9 people in attendance selected through a convenience sampling method. 23% of focus group participants were between 18-29 years, 55% were between 30-49 years of age, and 22% were between 50-65 years. Themes emerging from the discussion included, limitations to the existing public dental programs, difficulty accessing specialist dental care, need for a universal public funded dental program, need for an alliance by community members to address dental needs, high cost of dental treatment and lack of dental coverage- with the latter two themes recurring throughout the discussion.

WellFort also conducted an informal oral health survey to capture the dental health needs of community members. The cross-sectional survey was administered from October through December 2016 where 210 participants responded to the online and paper surveys, distributed via local community agencies and groups in Peel. The main findings are shown below:
Geographic Distribution of Participants
- Brampton: 64.4%
- Mississauga: 21.6%
- Caledon: 13.0%
- N/A: 1.0%

Age of Participants
- 0-17: 3.8%
- 18-25: 4.8%
- 26-64: 43.8%
- 65+: 47.6%

Dental Expense Coverage
- No Coverage: 55.8%
- Private Coverage: 19.7%
- Healthy Smiles Ontario: 8.6%
- Region of Peel Dental Program: 4.3%
- OW/ODSP: 5.3%
- Other: 1.5%

Reason for Dental Visit
- Dental exam, cleaning or checkup: 64.7%
- Emergency treatment: 30.4%

Dental Condition
- Pain or Discomfort: 49.0%
- Swollen Gums: 27.0%
- Missing/Loose or Broken Teeth: 27.0%

Barriers to Dental Care
- Cost: 68%
- Not Applicable for Participant: 6.3%
- Not Concerned With Dental Issues: 8.7%
- Difficulty finding a dentist: 27%
Discussion

Many of the participants surveyed were adults (47.6%) or seniors (43.8%) with majority residing in Brampton (64.4%). Access to dental services was a concern for many respondents with 65.7% citing cost as a barrier to seeing a dentist. This finding was consistent with the focus group study results. High cost of dental treatment was cited as a barrier to accessing oral health services- with several residents sharing experiences about difficulties faced having to forego a basic necessity in favour of dental treatment. The survey also revealed physical access to a dentist was not a barrier for majority of participants. For many of the participants, dentists were physically accessible within a 30 mins travel from home/work. This finding in Peel is similar to the Canadian statistics with 80% of Canadians having a dentist they can access\(^7\). This revealed that availability of services is not a barrier to accessing oral health services, but affordability. Recent evidence shows 1 in 5 Ontarians cannot afford to see a dentist\(^11\). With a population of 1.4 million in Peel\(^8\), this translates to 280,000 people unable to afford dental treatment- many of whom are some of the vulnerable groups WellFort serves.

Though oral disease has been shown to affect people from all stages of life, it disproportionately affects the poorest and marginalized groups\(^4,6,7,11\). The conditions in which people are born, live, work and play, has an impact on their health. These conditions or factors, referred to as the social determinants of health (SDOH), also have an impact on oral health\(^11,12\). Some SDOH include income, gender, food security, education, employment, etc. These factors create unfair and avoidable differences in health outcomes, referred to as health inequities. Oral health inequities exist as well. These inequities exist due to the impact the SDOH have on oral health outcomes\(^12\). For individuals experiencing unfavourable SDOH, accessing oral health services proves difficult; as such succumbing to oral disease becomes inevitable.
The privately funded dental care model in Ontario contributes to the barriers preventing people from accessing oral health services. This barrier was evident as 55.8% of participants had no dental coverage, almost 50% last visited the dentist more than 3 years before and 22% only visiting the dentist when they had an issue. These findings were consistent with research studies on dental insurance inequalities and income as major barriers vulnerable individuals face in accessing oral health services in Canada. These individuals tend to have the highest dental needs and face the greatest barriers accessing oral health services. As a result, they suffer worse oral health outcomes. This was evident in the study with over half of the participants rating their health as either fair or poor. The focus group study also reinforced these findings as residents shared concern about their oral health status not being optimal and the effect it had on their general health. Some mentioned the impact poor oral health had on their already existing chronic conditions. When asked if they had a dental emergency and where they sought treatment, more than half the participants revealed they had a dental emergency at some point in their life with majority visiting the dentist and fewer, the emergency room. The impact of dental issues on health and wellbeing was evidenced by over 50% of respondents citing difficulty in eating (with nearly 1 in 2 citing dental pain as the most common dental condition) and 24% citing sleeping difficulties as a result of dental issues. This brings to attention the need for good dental health for residents in Peel as an important aspect of overall health and a determinant of quality of life.

From the focus group study, many of the participants mentioned having subsidized dental care costs would be of great benefit. One participant cited, “We need more benefits, because ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program) patients have limited dental coverage”. Yet another noted, “We need dental plan like OHIP but for basic dental care, such as cleaning, root canal treatment, and broken teeth”. Though several participants commented on the sparse public dental coverage available for some vulnerable groups, a recurring theme was the importance of working together as a community to address dental issues. One participant cited, “we as residents in Peel, in Ontario, need to take matters into own hands where our dental health is concerned”. Another noted, “We need to figure out a way forward- it appears dental care isn’t going to be included into OHIP”. The participants from the focus group discussion mentioned a need for community members to come together more formally around access to oral health care, and in collaboration with the government, health and social services providers. These recurring themes from the community not only reinforce the need for equitable dental care in Peel, but also the urgency of the issue.

This oral health assessment has uncovered that residents in the Region of Peel, particularly lower income individuals, do in fact have unmet needs when it comes to accessing oral health care and these needs take a toll on their overall health and wellbeing.
Recommendations

The findings of this assessment, similar to that from the Region of Peel Oral Health Report, provide an insight into the oral health issues faced by residents of Peel. In order to move forward from where we are, a call for collaboration between community-led organizations, local health agencies and professionals, policy makers and the community would help transform the oral health landscape of Peel.

**Municipal and Regional**

Oral health advocates: Community based health care agencies (ex. WellFort), health and social service providers, social justice groups, Peel Public Health

- Raise awareness of the importance of oral health through media campaigns (local and social media)
- Develop oral health education and promotion activities for the community
- Build capacity in the local community to take control over their health
- Ensure collaboration between other oral health advocacy efforts happening locally
- Support building of public policies aimed at improving oral health
- Foster collaboration between local and provincial campaign efforts to expand publicly funded dental programs to include low-income adults and seniors
- Lobby municipal government to support local oral health initiatives
- Support ongoing oral health advocacy efforts by Ontario Oral Health Alliance
- Guide and support community action through an Oral Health Coalition in Peel
  - Intersectoral collaboration to improve community oral health and overall health
  - Developing community-led oral health initiatives for the most vulnerable
  - Advocating for increased access to oral health services
- Support routine oral health needs assessment and surveillance
- Lobby regional government to create dental programs for the more vulnerable groups

**Provincial**

Provincial government

- Develop oral health policies that integrate the broader issues of social, economic and environmental determinants of health
- Expand dental programs to include low-income adults and seniors
- Encourage program evaluations of current public dental programs
- Include dental care in universal health insurance plan
Federal

Federal government:

- Develop a national oral health policy

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The aim of the oral health assessment was to understand the dental needs of residents in Peel. The surveys were distributed through the WellFort’s network which serves many vulnerable groups in the Peel area, specifically Brampton-as such may not be representative of the entire population in Peel. Sampling method was a non-probability (convenient) sampling technique; hence may not entirely represent the population. Surveys were distributed for a short period of time, between October and December 2016 through paper and web –based surveys. Although there was some room for open ended responses, the questions were limited but standardized and adapted from other oral health needs assessment surveys that have been successful with validated questions.

Acknowledgement

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References


Appendix 1: Peel Oral Health Snapshot Info-Graphic

Peel Oral Health Snapshot

WellFort Community Health Services conducted an oral health survey to identify oral health needs of residents in the Region of Peel.

Dental Coverage

- Ontario Works: 6%
- Ontario Disability Support Program: 4%
- Private Insurance: 4%
- Healthy Smiles Ontario: 20%
- Region’s Seniors’ Dental Program: 6%
- None: 6%
- Other: 4%

Geography

- Mississauga: 22%
- Brampton: 26%
- Caledon: 13%

Tooth Health

- 49% Pain
- 27% Swelling
- 27% Loose/Missing

Visits for Emergency Care

- No dental emergency: 40%
- Emergency Room: 9%
- Dentist office: 18%
- Self-care: 5%

Reason for Visit

- Routine treatment: 30%
- Emergency treatment: 5%
- Other: 65%

Last Visit to the Dentist

- Never: 6%
- 3 years+: 18%
- 1-2 years: 20%
- I only go when I have an issue: 21%
- Within 1 yr: 35%

Barriers to Accessing Dental Care

- Cost: 27%
- N/A: 68%
- Other: 5%

The findings revealed the need for more accessible dental health services. Majority of participants cited cost of dental treatment as a barrier to visiting a dentist with many having no coverage.

* N/A or none
** Difficulty finding a dentist or not concerned with dental health
Appendix 2: WellFort Dental Health Needs Survey

Dental Health Needs Survey
WellFort Community Health Services is doing a survey to learn more about the dental health care needs of our clients and community living in the Region of Peel. The information you provide will remain confidential. Kindly tick and comment where applicable. Please provide complete and honest answers. The survey takes only a few minutes to complete. Thank you!

1. What is your age?
   □ 0-17
   □ 18-25
   □ 26-64
   □ 65+

2. Where do you live?
   □ Brampton
   □ Caledon
   □ If Mississauga, do you live in Malton? □ Yes / □ No
   □ Other

3. What dental benefits do you currently have?
   □ Ontario Works
   □ Ontario Disability Support Program
   □ Private Insurance
   □ ONTOT/Healthy Smiles
   □ Interim Federal Health Program
   □ Non-Insured Health Benefit Program
   □ I don’t know
   □ None
   □ Others

4. When did you last visit a dentist?
   □ Never
   □ I don’t know
   □ 15+ years
   □ 7-14 years
   □ 3-6 years
   □ 1-2 years
   □ 0-11 months, if so, how many times in the past 12 months did you see a dentist? □ 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 or more □ I only go when I have a dental issue

5. What was the reason for your last visit?
   □ Checkup/ examination/ cleaning
   □ Routine treatment
   □ Emergency treatment
   □ I only go when I have pain/dental issue

6. Do any of the following issues pose a problem for you to be able to see a dentist? Please check all that apply
   □ No coverage and unable to afford a dentist
   □ Limited coverage and unable to afford the additional costs
   □ I’m not concerned with my dental issues
☐ Fear of dentists/dental work
☐ Difficulty finding a dentist or difficulty accessing a dentist
☐ Too busy- no time to see a dentist
☐ Not applicable
☐ Others, please explain:

7. Have you experienced any of the following dental issues recently?
   ☐ Pain
   ☐ Missing, loose or broken teeth/tooth
   ☐ Swollen or bleeding gums
   ☐ Sores or abscesses
   ☐ Not applicable
   ☐ Other. Please explain:

8. Have past or present dental issues ever affected your life in any of the following ways?
   ☐ Eating
   ☐ Talking
   ☐ Socializing
   ☐ Self-esteem
   ☐ Finding or maintaining work
   ☐ Not applicable
   ☐ Other. Please explain:

9. Have you ever had a dental emergency? If yes, what did you do?
   ☐ Nothing
   ☐ Went to the hospital ER or urgent care
   ☐ Went to a private dentist
   ☐ Not applicable
   ☐ Addressed it on your own. If so, please explain:

10. How many of your natural teeth do you have?
    ☐ All
    ☐ 20 or more
    ☐ 10-19
    ☐ 1-9
    ☐ None
    ☐ I don't know

11. Do you wear removable dentures?
    ☐ Yes
    ☐ No
    ☐ Not applicable
    If yes, what kind of dentures do you use?
    ☐ Partial
    ☐ Complete

12. Would it be possible to see a dentist when needed within a distance of 30 minutes either from home or work?
13. How would you rate your overall dental health?
- Poor
- Fair
- Good
- Very Good
- Excellent

14. If you would like to provide additional feedback please comment in the box below:

Thank you for completing the survey!