

# Rural Oral Health: Challenges and Pit Falls: Time to Recover And Rebuild the Pathway: A Review Article

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## Abstract

Health or oral health is right of every individual. Oral Health is basically a complete state of health which is free of all discomforts. A state where eating, smiling and speaking is not hampered by any kind of discomfort or disability.

Rural oral health care faces challenges both ways for dentists as well as for people residing in the particular vicinity. These challenges can be listed as follows: dentist: population Ratio, literacy rate, accessibility, availability, affordability, socio – economic status, malpractice.

There are few common barriers that a dentist faces while thinking of serving at a rural area. They can be summarized as safety, basic amenities, monetary constraints, lack of professional skills, distance and a compromised lifestyle.

Government and various Dental Associations are making repeated efforts to overcome these challenges and pitfalls to uplift the rural oral health care.

**Key Words:** Rural Oral Health, Dentist: Population ratio, accessibility, affordability, challenges

## Introduction

Oral health is right of every individual as good health is right of every individual. Oral health can be defined as “a state of being free from chronic mouth and facial pain, oral and throat cancer, oral infections and sores, periodontal diseases, tooth decay, tooth loss and other diseases and disorders that limit an individual’s capacity in biting, chewing, smiling, speaking and psychosocial well-being”<sup>1</sup>.

According to World Bank every country has a percentage of rural population that is deprived more of oral health services. In India 66% of the population resides in rural parts of the country. There are countries which have a large percentage of rural population like Nepal (80%), Sri-Lanka (82%), Zimbabwe (68%), and many more such countries are there that have a large

number of population residing in the remote part of their countries. Such kind of population generally has quacks that provide all sorts of malpractice treatment which are not only threat for oral health care of the patients but they are also threat for the field of dentistry<sup>1</sup>.

As per Kimberly K. McFarland et al., approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, whereas only 14 percent of the dentists practice in rural locations. 4 percent of small areas and 2 percent is isolated in rural areas that are deprived of all kind of dental services. As per Nastaran Sharifian et al., there is chronic shortage of dentists in rural communities of Canada may affect the quality of care provided to these communities.

Hence this article has been written to focus on the common challenges and pit falls that the population and the dentist face due to which the rural population still is deprived of good oral health care.

## Challenges and Pit Falls

## Challenges for Establishment of Successful Oral

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**Health Care Delivery****1. Dentist: Population Ratio:**

There is huge imbalance in the dentist population ratio. This imbalance is not only faced in India but also in various developed countries. As per World Health Organization the ideal dentist population ratio is 1:7500 but there are only 93% of the members short of this ratio either the ratio is more or less than the ideal ratio. Therefore, it is resulting in imbalance.

In India the dentist: population ratio is 1:9000 in the urban areas and 1:200,000 in rural areas. Similarly, dentist: population ratio in U.S. is 1:1000, in U.K. it is 1:2000, in Canada 1:1500, Australia 1:2573. These are the data for urban population mostly. Repeated studies have shown chronic shortage of dentist in rural areas of almost every country.

**2. Literacy rate:**

Literacy rate plays an important role in maintaining of oral hygiene. This statement is false and true both ways. In India highest literacy rate is 93.68% and lowest is 63.52% but still the oral health of the population varies from good to very poor. Even the rural population where literacy rate is low there also there are people who have good oral hygiene. Literacy rate of the particular family matters as generally we tend to inculcate habits and routine seeing the family members. A well literate family who has a hygienic lifestyle generally have the trend of good oral hygiene in the complete family.

In India, use of dantoons and various kinds of toothpastes is still prevalent in remote parts of the country. Even after companies like Colgate – Palmolive run oral health month campaign every year in which they distribute toothpaste and toothbrush to population of rural areas of India.

In India there are few barriers which play a significant role in rising of oral health services. They are:

1). Lack of Respect and trust on dentists. The population in rural areas are at times blinded with myths. These myths act as barrier for reaching of right kind of oral health care to the population.

2). Different mindsets: Myths play a very negative role when it comes to providing of dental services in the rural population.

3). Poor listening skills: Reinforcement of things is a key to successful rural oral health. Repeated awareness programs need to be conducted for implementation of successful oral health services.

4). Knowledge deficits

5). Lack of alignment around goals

6). Internal Competitiveness

7). Information Hoarding

**3. Accessibility and Availability**

Accessibility of services for upliftment of oral health at rural areas is a real challenge. With increase in number of dentists yearly the congestion of clinics is more in urban areas as compared to rural areas. Even the government has started taking initiative to place dentists in primary health centers with the aim to uplift the oral health of the rural population. Accessibility and availability are inter-related. With 313 dental colleges across India availability of dentists have become little easier. On a positive every dental college has mandatory Department of Public Health Dentistry which works with the motive to uplift rural oral health mostly.

**4. Affordability**

Dental services that are provided to population has a range of fees for all kinds of treatment available. When deciding on the fees for dental services with the aim to treat rural population one thing should always be kept in mind to work with aim of no profit. At a less or a nominal fee the treatments can be provided very much.

The government also should launch health schemes that include coverage for oral health services as well.

**5. Malpractice**

It is one of the challenges which is on rise extremely. Every rural locality has some quack present who is providing malpractice and the treatment provided are so reasonable that the population in mass is blinded with the treatment irrespective of whether it would really cure the problem or aggravate the problem. Such kind of malpractice is a big threat. This threat is not only in India but across the world.

Challenges for the Dentists:

There are certain challenges that a dentist has to face when planning for a rural setup.

**1. Safety:**

We are well aware about the attacks happened at doctors by patients or their relatives while treatment of the patients. Such incidences have questioned the safety issue of the dentists. A fear or threat to life in rural areas is prevalent. Lack of awareness is the basic problem that is faced. Repeated Awareness programs for the masses is one solution to this challenge.

**2. Basic Amenities.:**

It is a well-known fact that rural areas are deprived of basic amenities like electricity, water, etc. But as of now the government has worked immensely on such issues therefore making it little easier. But schools and education system in rural localities is still quite compromised. Any dentist who plans to setup a clinic in rural areas always has a hesitation as compared to setting up clinic in urban areas.

**3. Monetary constraints:**

As the population in rural areas are employed in a basic manner where their income is very nominal, so affording dental treatment is a big challenge for them as well. The income at rural setup is challenging. Where patients in urban areas are ready to pay fees for the treatment modalities rural population is still on the back foot for it. Therefore, monetary constraint is always a challenge too.

**4. Lack of professional skills:**

Rural dentistry demands only basic oral health care treatments. Specialization work in rural population is a rare. Public Health Dentists are trained during the post-graduation period in the similar manner so that they can serve the rural population efficiently.

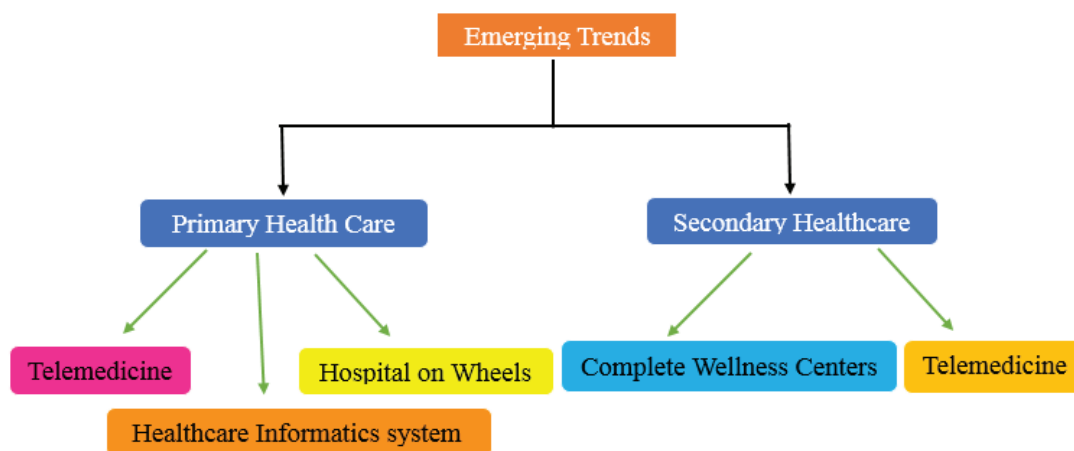
**5. Distance and Compromised lifestyle:**

It is another one big challenge for any dentist who plans to setup to serve in rural area. As the rural areas are at a respectable distance from the cities therefore the lifestyle is also compromised. But on the other side with number of dental colleges in the country this challenge has also come to some ease for people. As most of the dental colleges are located at a place that surrounds number of villages and are at the outskirts of the city, making it easier for the population of rural areas easier to access dental services.

**Role of Government and Different Dental Associations for Upliftment of Rural Oral Health**

Government is presently actively working in the field of rural areas for strengthening of health services as well as oral health services at primary and secondary health care level.

The emerging trends in India in field of health services is changing. Earlier the trend was strengthening of tertiary level health care but now with the changing concept the trend has shifted to strengthening of primary and secondary level health care.



**Ayushmann Bharat.**

Some of the initiatives taken by the Health ministry and Government of India are Ayushmann Bharat Scheme. The Scheme was started by our Hon' Prime Minister on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2019 with a goal for universal healthcare for all. This goal was initially the aim of World Health Organization. The scheme has been formulated completely on Public private partnership model<sup>3</sup>.

This scheme is specially formulated for the upliftment of rural health sector. The main motive of the scheme is to convert all the primary health center to complete wellness centers. It is an overall national health protection mission.

**National Oral Health Programme**

The vision of this program is networking for optimal oral health of the nation that contributes to lead healthy and satisfying life. To develop the standard of health, free from diseases, which enables a person to eat, speak, socialize and carry out the activities of daily living without pain, discomfort or embarrassment and contribute to general well – being.

There are various programmes/ initiatives that have been started under this programme which are basically designed to uplift overall oral health for all.

1. Tobacco cessation Initiative.
2. Child Dental Care
3. Oral Cancer Foundation
4. Healing Smile Foundation
5. National Oral Cancer Registry
6. National School Oral Health Programme
7. Swwach Mukh Abhiyan

**Role of Public Health Dentist.**

Public Health Dentistry is branch of dentistry that trains the person to work not only in rural areas but also evaluate and plan schemes to uplift the oral health of the population in mass. In a similar term it is population-based dentistry.

In India there are 313 dental colleges across the country. These dental colleges have a mandatory Public

Health Dentistry Department. This department of every institute works to uplift the rural oral health for the population around the institute. They evaluate and plan schemes to benefit the population with the oral health services in a very cost – effective way.

**Conclusion**

Health is necessary for all similarly oral health is also part of general health. Maintaining oral health is as mandatory as maintaining of health. With a mass population residing in rural parts of country creating awareness and planning schemes to uplift the rural is one of the missions of Government as well as dental associations<sup>4,5</sup>.

Awareness programmes along with outreach activities time to time need to be planned to make the mass aware and reinforce the importance of oral health. Strengthening of primary and secondary level health care on the model of public private partnership is the only key to achieve success completely in the mission.

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