



Considerations when venturing into community engagement with those who struggle to access advice or care

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Aim

This opinion piece aims to inform oral healthcare teams of the considerations required when venturing into community engagement practices to support those in our communities who struggle to access oral health advice or care. It aims to illustrate the experiences Peninsula Dental School and Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise have in this area.

Introduction

Taking oral health prevention directly

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out into our community enables us, as dental professionals, to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers and challenges people face in maintaining good oral health and allows us to share 'dental top tips' with those who may otherwise struggle to access advice. It also enables us to explore opportunities to address these barriers, where possible, whilst empowering participants to feel able and capable of oral health self-care. With many years' outreach experience, here are some of our community engagement top tips.

Know your community

Understand the level(s) of deprivation and need in the specific area you want to engage with. This information is often available through local councils, in this case Plymouth City Council Neighbourhood Profiles.¹ There is a wealth of information available to all that is easily accessible to help build your knowledge and understanding of your community. Some key sites and topics to explore would be your local community profiles from local authority public health,¹ reading around the social determinants of health² and trauma informed care and

practice,³ World Health Organization (WHO),⁴ World Health Fund,⁵ Local Government Association (LGA),⁶ Oral Health Foundation,⁷ GOV.uk website,⁸ The Health Foundation⁹ and the *British Dental Journal*.¹⁰

Understand your community

Identify what is already happening in your local area, so you do not replicate or saturate the market. Ideally try to enhance existing engagement by providing additional support but if you identify a gap then do something new. Seek out a list of local charities that tie into your area of engagement and collate a list of projects you may be able to work with.

Listen to your community

Generate a two-way conversation to build a trusting relationship. It is not always about clinical delivery – conversation and listening go a long way. Many areas now have community builders or community connectors who are extremely knowledgeable and are a great connection to make when you are looking to build these trusting relationships and understand need. Do not judge; this is crucial to a positive engagement experience for all.

Work with your community

Where possible, build partnerships with those already working in the area. Conduct consultation or seek feedback from those you are looking to work with and then listen to what they say. They are the experts in what they need and how they need support and guidance. It can be helpful, early on, to identify and respond to challenges, as there will be some.

Deliver to your community

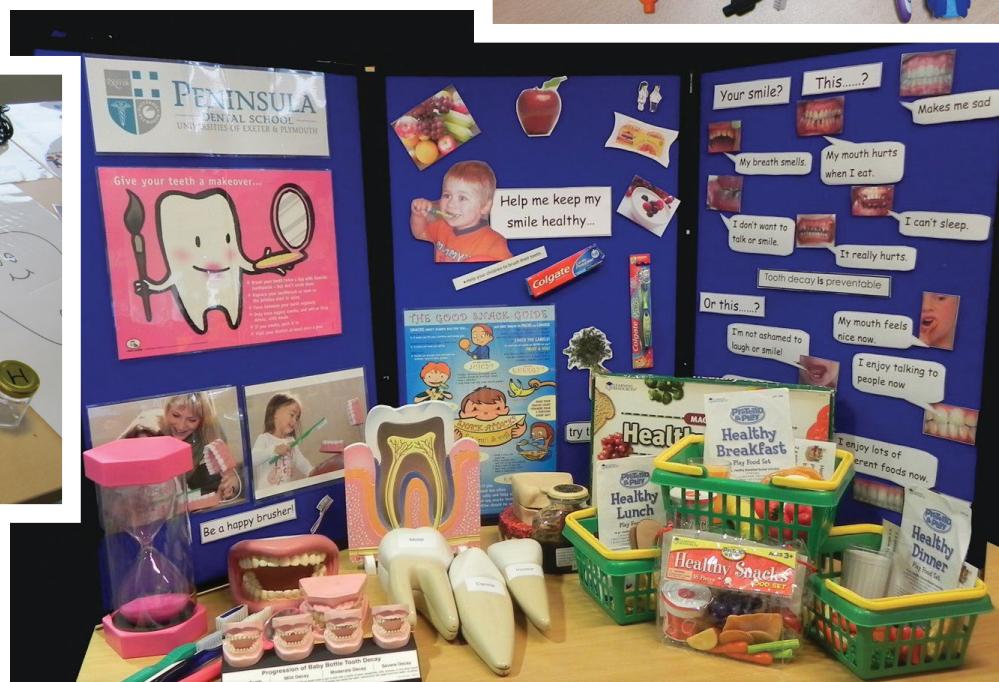
When engaging with your community be sure to go to them rather than expecting them to come to you. Choose times that work for your community, not necessarily for you. It can be helpful to deliver engagement as a 'knowledge exchange' where you share information and the community also share

you are chairside. Sometimes something as simple as colouring-in can enable someone to sit alongside you whilst talking about difficult topics or talking over a cup of tea, rather than a formal 'engagement' session. Do not underestimate the power of simply being alongside people where they are and mirroring what they are doing to gain trust and time to talk.

Is it sustainable?

Consider sustainability when planning and delivering your project both from an environmental and longevity perspective.¹¹ When considering environmental impact, think about team size, travel, consumables such as products to give away, bags you may

members of the community to enable them to have further conversations or leaving appropriate information to share and remind those who attended. Tiny considerations can



'Think up interesting, interactive activities to keep people engaged and think of new and unique ways to share oral health information that may be completely different to when you are chairside.'

their knowledge back to help you better understand and support appropriately. Be sure to base everything you deliver in evidence. Use engaging, meaningful resources that are appropriate for your audience. Be creative and think up interesting, interactive activities to keep people engaged and think of new and unique ways to share oral health information that may be completely different to when

use to distribute consumables along with use of digital resources and information rather than paper. Where possible reduce plastic waste and disposable items. When looking at longevity, consider how your project may carry on once you have left; can you leave a legacy behind that enables those to continue to feel able to talk about oral health? That could mean delivering training to key

make a significant difference and can be the start of bigger things.

Be responsive to your community

Listen, adapt, change, accept it is not always easy, but remember the community is the expert in their own lives and can guide you and co-produce the engagement to ensure you are able to maximise benefit and outcomes for all.



Tiny considerations can make a significant difference and can be the start of bigger things.'

Conclusion

Outreach and engagement provides benefits both for us, as dental professionals, and our communities who may otherwise struggle to access dental health information and guidance. Taking the time away from clinic to engage with members of our community affords us a privileged opportunity to share key oral health messages with people who may not be able to access dental appointments or have the ability to seek out evidence-based advice and guidance. We have a responsibility not only to our patients whom we meet chairside, but to those who live and work around us. Outreach provides us with the amazing chance to...

Enquire

Non-judgemental

Give time

Act

Generate interest

Encourage.

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