

Factors Affecting Unmet Dental Care Needs of the Elderly Living Alone: A Mini Review

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ABSTRACT

Patients with unmet dental care needs are cases for which dental treatment is necessary but is not received. The oral health of the elderly population requires attention because of various oral diseases and tooth loss accumulated since childhood. Elderly individuals living alone face difficulties in maintaining oral health independently and receiving dental treatment due to the absence of supports. Therefore, this mini review provides information on relevant factors influencing unmet dental care needs of the elderly living alone.

Keywords: Elderly living alone, Unmet dental care, Unmet medical care, Stress

INTRODUCTION

As the world's population continues to age, interest in the health of the elderly is increasing. Various welfare policies related to the elderly have been advanced, with a focus on maintaining a healthy older life [1]. Along with physical and mental health issues, interest in oral health issues has also increased [2]. Oral health is an essential component of overall health, and oral health conditions and diseases in the elderly are important because they can act as risk factors associated with chronic diseases and certain medication use [3].

The elderly living alone face many difficulties because they do not have dependents to provide support [4]. The lack of support from cohabiting families can lead to social problems in harsh environments [5]. The elderly living alone may have many unmet medical care needs due to their social vulnerability [6].

Patients with unmet dental care needs refer to those patients who require dental care, but they do not receive it [7]. Previous studies on unmet dental care needs have found that older people often experience more unmet dental care needs [8], suggesting that the elderly are vulnerable to unmet dental care needs.

REVIEW

As a result of identifying factors related to unmet dental care needs in the elderly living alone, one study confirmed that the lower the monthly household income and the higher the

symptoms of stress and depression, the higher is the rate of unmet dental care needs [9].

Most elderly individuals believe that dental care is expensive. In addition, because low-income elderly individuals often do not have any financial support from their families [5], dental care may be even more difficult to access. In previous studies, the most common cause of adults' dissatisfaction with dental care was economic reasons [10]. It has been estimated that the elderly living alone have economic issues [11], and their dental needs are not satisfied because of their low economic level.

Furthermore, previous research has shown that the elderly who experience depression have higher unmet medical needs [12]. In comparison with the general elderly population, elderly individuals who live alone have a lower quality of life and a higher level of stress related to their poorer health because of the lack of family, social, or economic support. Hence, they are more likely to be exposed to factors harmful

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to their health, which can lead to unmet medical needs [13]. Oral disease is believed to result from this lack of support because it affects daily life to a lesser extent than systemic diseases. Also, oral disease is not a serious disease directly leading to death.

CONCLUSION

The unmet dental care needs of the elderly living alone are related to high stress and depression. As such, it is necessary to develop a program to improve these factors affecting unmet dental care needs. In addition, it is important to develop a system for managing stress and depression to help improve the quality of life of the elderly living alone.

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