

THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF ORAL HEALTH AMONG THE ELDERLY IN JOHANNESBURG: IMPLICATIONS FOR AN ORAL HEALTH PROGRAMME

Abstract

Introduction: Although oral healthcare for the elderly is free in South Africa, there are concerns about the low utilization rate of services among this group.

Objectives: This study sought to determine the perceived value of oral healthcare amongst the elderly in Johannesburg and to consider its implications for an oral health promotion programme. **Methods:** This was a qualitative, Grounded Theory study. Participants were purposively recruited from two retirement villages in Johannesburg. Data was obtained by using an open-ended interview schedule and a recording device. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized with heterogeneous groups of elderly males and females [7 groups comprising 6-8 individuals] at both institutions. The discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. Upon completion of the interviews, direct and complete transcripts of the FGD sessions and the field notes were typed out and then analysed using the techniques and procedures of Grounded Theory (coding and thematic analyses) via “word by word” and “phrase by phrase” analyses. **Results:** Five major theoretical categories were found to contribute to informing implications on planning for an oral health programme for the elderly. 1. Perspective view of oral health”- although most of the participants viewed the mouth as an integral part of general health, they only visited the dentist for pain or discomfort symptoms. 2. Effect on Quality of Life (QoL) - participants reported that activities such as chewing and smiling were important elements that impacted on their QoL. 3. Importance of social support- the elderly faced numerous hurdles that were barriers to accessing oral healthcare. 4. Positive self-identity from use of dental services. 5. Mode to oral health education - they wanted services to be brought to them. **Conclusion:** There were mixed views about the importance of the mouth with many highlighting the need for more education and awareness about the importance of a healthy mouth for overall good general health. Additionally, they preferred oral health promotion and services to be brought to them rather than making the effort to visit oral health care facilities. Finally, this report explores the implications of these findings for any oral health education programme, on the basis of the grounded model generated from the study.