

Factors Influencing General Dentists' Willingness to Treat Patients with Special Health Care Needs in Oklahoma

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Introduction

- Individuals with **special health care needs (SHCN)** often face **significant disparities in oral health and access to care**, placing them at higher risk for conditions like periodontal disease and untreated caries.
- A major barrier to access is the **availability of dental professionals willing and able to provide care**, as many general dentists are hesitant to treat SHCN patients due to a lack of training, experience, and confidence.
- Because the number of specialists is insufficient to meet patient demand, **increasing the participation of general dentists is essential** to reducing oral health inequalities.
- Study Aim:** To identify the factors associated with general dentists' willingness to provide care to patients with SHCN in the state of Oklahoma

Methods

- Study Design:** A cross-sectional, web-based survey administered by the Oklahoma Dental Association (ODA) to **1,306 active ODA member dentists** via REDCap between December 2025 and January 2026.
- Participants:** General dentists currently practicing in Oklahoma who are members of the Oklahoma Dental Association.
- Measures:** The survey assessed demographics, practice characteristics, training history, perceived barriers, comfort levels, and willingness to provide care using multiple-choice and Likert-scale items.
- Analysis:** After utilizing complete-case analysis for the **34 respondents who met the eligibility criteria**, responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and exploratory comparisons were performed where appropriate. Given the low response rate, findings should be interpreted as exploratory and hypothesis-generating.

Results

- Demographics:** Among 34 respondents, **50% practiced in rural areas and 50% had ≥20 years of experience.**
- Training Gaps:** While 50% reported SHCN training in dental school, **94.1% had no residency training and 61.8% had never completed continuing education** in special needs dentistry.
- Barriers to Care:** The most reported barriers were **lack of training (52.9%)**, lack of time/resources (47.1%), and inadequate reimbursement (41.2%).
- Accessibility vs. Readiness:** Although 91.2% of offices were ADA compliant, **only 14.7% reported staff were fully trained** to assist with SHCN care.
- Attitudes:** **82.4% of dentists agreed that general dentists have a professional obligation** to treat patients with special health care needs.

Significance

- Mismatch between willingness and capacity:** Most general dentists report a professional obligation to treat patients with SHCN, yet significant barriers limit actual care delivery.
- Accessibility ≠ readiness:** High rates of ADA compliance do not translate to operational preparedness, with major gaps in staff training and clinical support.
- System-level barriers persist:** Lack of training, time/resources, and inadequate reimbursement continue to restrict integration of SHCN care into general practice.
- Strain on specialist workforce:** Limited participation from general dentists shifts the burden of care to an already constrained specialist pool.
- Need for targeted solutions:** Expanding hands-on training, improving team preparedness, and addressing reimbursement structures are critical to improving access to care.

Conclusions

- General dentists in Oklahoma demonstrate a strong sense of **professional responsibility** to treat patients with special health care needs; however, care delivery remains limited by gaps in training, staff preparedness, and reimbursement.
- The **discrepancy** between high ADA compliance and low staff readiness indicates that physical accessibility alone does not reflect true capacity to provide care.
- Although based on a limited sample, findings highlight the **need for targeted interventions**, including hands-on training for providers and staff and improved reimbursement structures.
- Addressing these barriers is essential** to expand access to care and reduce reliance on the specialist workforce.

