Benefits of Oral HIV Testing in the Dental Chair

Organization:
Columbia College of Dental Medicine, New York, NY

Summary:
Oral HIV testing provides a tremendous service to the individual patient and to the public. It is very important for every individual to know their HIV status to protect themselves and others. Many individuals are HIV positive and do not know it. While many of these individuals visit the dentist regularly, they do not visit a physician regularly. There is a tremendous opportunity to screen people during a dental visit in a very discreet setting.

This initiative is designed to increase the number of oral HIV testing conducted during a dental examination. By targeting dental patients, a provider is able to offer HIV testing to individuals who would not initiate testing on their own, whether it is out of fear or embarrassment. By offering this service at a routine dental visit, the patient can be very comfortable in the testing setting. The results are available within 20 minutes, at which the patient will be educated on how to follow up if the test comes back positive.

How to Overcome Challenges:
One of the challenges in integrating oral testing into the dental visit is the difficulty many dentists have in actually suggesting to the patient that they have an HIV test in the dental chair. This is a topic not normally discussed by the dentist and their patient. So, dentists must be educated to become comfortable bringing up the topic of HIV and risk factors for HIV with the dental patient.

One way to encourage dentists to test is to educate them on the fact that approximately 1/3 of the approximate 1 million people infected with HIV in the USA do not know they are HIV+. In other words, there are a few hundred thousand people infected with HIV in the USA who are unaware of their + status. It is those who are unaware of this + status who are responsible for infecting approximately 60% of the new HIV+ cases.

Therefore, dentists should be instructed on the important role they play in the diagnosis and prevention of spreading this epidemic. If they understand the gravity of this disease, they should be more inclined to test. Dentists may also be more inclined to test if they understand that the earlier the diagnosis and treatment, the better the outcome for the patient.

Procedure:
The test should be conducted by the dentist once the patient is seated in the chair. The wand used to swab the gingiva is placed in a small vial containing developer solution for 20 minutes. The vial is placed in a stand behind the patient, facing away from everyone so that nobody will look at the test while focusing on the dental treatment. Once the dental procedure is completed and patient ready for dismissal, the dentist can view the test at which time also deliver the results to the patient.
Before one institutes testing in the dental practice, the flow of the test must be discussed at great length with the entire staff.

Finally, a plan must be in place for those tests which come back reactive. A rapid test which comes back "reactive" for HIV indicates that there is a 99% chance this patient is HIV+. Now, the dentist must deliver the news in addition to being prepared to refer the patient for both:

a) blood work confirmation and
b) counseling and connection to care.

Before initiating testing in the dental chair, the clinic/practice must have 3 challenges they are prepared for:
1) how to offer the patient a rapid HIV test
2) how to integrate the test into the standard dental visit
3) what to do, if the test does come back reactive.

Available Training to Administer the Test:
As far as training goes, the company which manufactures the only rapid oral HIV test approved by the FDA (OraQuick Advance HIV-1/2), Orasure, will come to your clinic and provide training. Refer to www.orasure.com.

However, because the complexity of the test is so low, a dentist does not need any formal training. The directions which accompany the kit should be sufficient for a dentist regarding the procedure. However, before a Health Center integrates a testing program into their clinic, the Health Center should establish a "Director" for the testing. Then, the Director must establish a documentation system as well as a quality control system. Refer to the following link to help establish such systems: www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/testing/resources/guidelines/qu_guide/htm#

These rapid testing kits are available through many state and local departments of health. Some of these departments may offer trainings. Moreover, the kits are sometimes available for free or are available for less than the retail price.

Cost:
The OraQuick Advance test is available for purchase through Henry Schein.

The retail price for the kit through Henry Schein (without a Community Health Center discount) is as follows:

- A case of 25 kits for $311.67 which comes out to approximately $14.00 per kit.
- Once the Community Health Center discount is factored in, each kit would probably cost approximately $10.00 per kit.

What or how to charge the patient for the test really depends on the individual Health Center. Many organizations offer free HIV testing simply as an encouragement for people to test. The cost of the kit is not very much for the service that is provided to the patient and society.

It has been proven that testing based upon risk assessment has NOT been enough to stop the spread of HIV. One recommendation has been to offer the test to all ages 14-64. Another has been to offer it to all ages 14-84 as the cases of older people with HIV has been rising.

Benefits and Achievements of the Program:
One of the main benefits of offering HIV testing in the dental chair includes accessing a group of people who would never initiate testing on their own, for any reason. Some people simply do not believe they have been at risk while others are in denial. Some people may want to test but have not yet taken the initiative to seek testing. So many people visit a dentist annually but not a physician.

The dental chair is the perfect check point for people as far as HIV goes and it is a place they can recheck each time they have a dental exam. The dentist is already working in the mouth and therefore is an obvious candidate to administer this very simple test.

Lessons Learned:
The top lesson I have learned is that people do want to know their HIV status but are scared or embarrassed to initiate the process. If the discussion is raised comfortably by a dentist, someone with
whom they are already comfortable enough to allow treating their mouth, then the door is open for the discussion. The more comfortable the dentist is with the conversation, the more comfortable the patient is with agreeing to test. The dentist must remain open, informative and nonjudgmental.

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