

Will You Clean My Daughter's Teeth?

Understanding oral hygiene issues faced by people with Intellectual Disability

Throughout Irene's entire life, finding a dentist for her daughter, Jennifer (name changed to protect client's identity) has been a challenge. While most people can easily look up and make an appointment with one around their vicinity, Irene still hasn't found a suitable option. This is because Jennifer is a person with Intellectual Disability (PWID), and many basic services available / accessible to the general public are a challenge for her.



The first challenge pertains to a PWID's Health Literacy (HL). Having your teeth cleaned to prevent dental complications is something most people understand. In fact, the habit of brushing our teeth is instilled at a very young age. For a PWID, HL is a fairly abstract concept, one that many have trouble understanding (Bruland, Vetter & Latteck, 2020). Without the right explanation, many come to

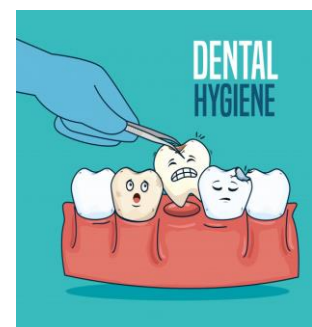
fear the process as they do not understand that the discomfort / pain might be part of the cleaning process. This inevitably results in struggle, resistance or even fear.



The second challenge is faced by the dentists, whom may not be equipped to interact with PWIDs. This exacerbates the already tense environment, particularly one that requires the patient to adhere to specific instructions (e.g to stay still or open one's mouth). If not handled correctly, the risk of proceeding might not be one that the professional would want to take.

The third challenge arises when negative experiences are perceived as traumatic by the PWIDs and their families. In order to not worsen the situation, many would rather "protect" the PWID by keeping them at home. Some may even try to teach or help them to brush their teeth but this process in itself is a challenge to instill, let alone maintain.

As a result, many PWIDs – including Jennifer – maintain very poor dental hygiene, and have not seen a dentist for most of their adult lives (in some cases, 20-30 years).



Fortunately, this is slowly changing as many welfare organisations, such as Tsao Foundation's Intellectual Disability Services (IDS), are now working to develop an integrated service ecosystem for PWIDs by forging partnerships with health, disability and social service providers, so that they can be supported to live well in the community. One such partnership is with Dr David Lim Guang Xu, which saw joint home visits conducted to over 15 PWID clients, to provide tailored and dental assessment and cleaning services. More of such collaborations are planned for 2021.

As for Irene, she simply felt relieved that Jennifer has finally cleaned her teeth and met a dentist that she likes. She plans to take Jennifer to Dr Lim's dental clinic for a follow-up, which is finally a step in the right direction towards cleaning her daughter's teeth.



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Reference

Bruland, D., Vetter, N., & Latteck, Ä. D. (2020). Health Literacy in people with intellectual disabilities—is there a need for an adapted concept?. *European Journal of Public Health, 30*(Supplement_5), ckaa166-297.