
Factors influencing the provision of dental services in private general practice

Submitted by David S. Brennan

Dental School, The University of Adelaide

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Supervised by Professor A. John Spencer
Social and Preventive Dentistry, The University of Adelaide

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Abstract

This thesis examines factors influencing the provision of dental services in Australian private general practice to address the documented variation in service rates, and questions of appropriateness of care arising from this variation. The aims of this thesis were to examine the association of services provided with dentist, practice, and patient factors, controlling for oral health status.

A random sample of 1,212 dentists was drawn from the dental registers of each Australian State/Territory and surveyed by mailed self-complete questionnaires during 1997-98, (response rate=60.3%). Private general practitioners (n=345) provided data from a log of one typical clinical day, (n=4,115 patient visits).

In general, patient, dentist and practice factors were significant explanatory variables in models of service provision which included oral health status. This indicates that service provision is not a simple deterministic pathway involving technical considerations of oral health status being converted into a treatment plan and provision of services. Patient, dentist and practice factors play an important mediating role in determining service patterns. Among the set of explanatory variables there was no single dominant variable or subset of variables. Service provision was influenced by a large number of small effects from a wide range of factors.

The findings indicated dentist characteristics such as practice beliefs and preferences for patients had an influence on service patterns. Further understanding of the

dentist-patient relationship, the development of practice beliefs, and the dynamics of treatment planning and decision-making could be beneficial to improving service outcomes. However, other factors such as insurance status and visit type were also associated with service patterns and have the potential to be altered to achieve better service outcomes. Geographic gradients in services indicated the operation of socio-economic and other area-based barriers on service patterns. While such geographic barriers may require broad policy initiatives to address their effects on service patterns, scope exists to investigate clinical outcomes to enhance the knowledge base of treatment decision-making. Such information could form the basis for development of clinical guidelines for care which could address the appropriateness of care issues stemming from the observed variation in service provision.