

FINAL REPORT

on

Head Start Oral Health Forum

Submitted by

**Ministry of Health
Majuro, Marshall Islands**

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Final Report on Head Start Oral Health Forum Republic of Marshall Islands

I. Summary of the forum

Background

In 2001, the Bureau of Primary Health Care in Majuro began the first systematic collection of oral health data in the elementary schools, Head Starts and pre-head start children and found that the prevalence of early childhood caries was very high and that the children had received neither preventive nor curative services, as they should. Recognizing the high level of need in the RMI, the Ministry assigned a dentist for preventive services and implemented a nationwide program of oral health services. A major part of the challenge to this program is to break the isolation of the Head Start oral health services in order for it to meet its mandated responsibilities. The forum was a unique opportunity, which led to development of an action plan for the Head Start Program.

Planning process

A Core Planning Group was established comprising of representatives from the government agencies involved in Head Start and health programs. The following is the list of membership to the CPG under the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Head Start Program and the Ministry of Health.

1. Dentist, MOH Preventive Services
2. Medical Coordinator, RMI Head Start Program
3. Coordinator, Maternal and Child Health Program
4. Chairperson, RMI Head Start Health Advisory Committee (parent)

The CPG met 4 times before the forum.

- The Preventive Services Dentist discussed on dental disease and prevention to enhance the knowledge of the members and the CPG reviewed the dental services rendered by the Head Start Dental Nurse, data and reports on Oral Health in the program to gain a better understanding of current oral health status in children.

- Stakeholders were identified and a draft agenda and limitation of funding was discussed.
- The invitees and participants, the time and place for the forum were selected.
- The agenda and the invitation were finalized. The education materials reproduced for distribution to the invitees and participants were reviewed.

Through out the planning process the Preventive Services Dentist constantly had consultations with the Regional Dental Public Health Consultant in San Francisco and the Director of Northwest/Alaska Center to Reduce Oral Health Disparity, University of Washington via e-mail.

Action plan development

The forum was conducted in plenary session with all participants in attendance. On the Opening Day, after the opening ceremony and special remarks from the Minister of Health and the Director of Head Start Program, presentations were made by the Preventive Services Dentist and the consultant from the University of Washington to all invitees and participants.

- Presentation with statistics on current oral health status in Marshallese children
- Presentation on Etiology and Prevention of Early Childhood Caries
Invitees and participants

From October 30 to November 1, discussions were made on the following topics and finalized the Action Plan.

- Review on responsibilities of HSP, screening and referrals
- Educating teachers and staff on Oral Health Care, Healthy Diet and Snacking
- Community awareness and empowerment of parents and families
- Post-forum activities, time-lines and responsibilities
- Development of Action plan to stimulate initiatives and expand efforts to improve Oral Health as part of Total Health
- Finalization of Action Plan

Invitees

Minister of Health
Minister of Education
Secretary of Health
Director of Dental Services
Director of Public Health/ MCH
Chairman of Head Start Policy Council

Participants

Director of Northwest/ Alaska Center to Reduce Oral Health Disparity
Dentist, MOH Preventive Services
Director of RMI Head Start Program
Medical Coordinator, RMI Head Start Program
Dental Nurse, RMI Head Start Program
Nutritional Coordinator, Head Start Program
Head Start teachers from Arno, Kwajalein and Majuro Atolls
Representative from the Local Government
Representative from Marshall Islands Women's Groups

Follow-up to forum

The action plan developed by the participants will be considered to be a formal agreement between the government agencies with the specific detailed responsibilities stated in the MOA, which will bear the clear input of the professional staff that are required to actually carry out the work. It was decided to implement the Prevented Program on 3 atolls, Majuro, Kwajalein and Arno, in the coming school year.

Budget

The total amount requested from the ASTDD was \$ 4965.00 and itemized budget break down was attached with justifications on proposal.

II. The Action Plan

A. Self Education

As lack of knowledge of good oral health practices hampers the participation of many important stakeholders, the initial part of the forum was devoted to increasing of knowledge of all invitees and participants about early childhood caries and its etiology, prevention and treatment.

- 1) Presentation by the consultant on Etiology and Prevention of ECC followed by discussion.
- 2) The following materials were reproduced and given to every invitee and participant to read, ask questions and to discuss during the forum and for later reference.
 - A booklet (a reproduction of appropriate chapters from ‘Early Childhood Caries’ A Team Approach to Prevention and Treatment by Peter Milgrom and Phillip Weinstein)
 - Material on ‘A Healthy Mouth for Your Baby’
 - Material on ‘Snack Smart for Healthy Teeth’
 - A guide to Children’s Dental Health by American Academy of Pediatrics
 - Frequently asked questions on Infants and Children and on Early Childhood Tooth Decay by the ADA

B. Review Responsibilities

The second part of the activities was the reviewing the mandate responsibilities of the Head Start Program with regard to health, particularly oral health in collaboration with the MOH.

The Head Start Director led the discussion with the review on current health and dental screening. Comments were made on procedures for and formal schedule for screening exams for the new HS enrollees. The Medical Coordinator and the Dental Nurse for the HSP presented the screening forms, explained the procedures and transfer of information. They were reminded about their obligations to meet the Head Start Performance Standard.

The Head Dental Nurse was directed by the Preventive Services Dentist how to fill the forms, collect data in a systemic way and to compile the data for recording and analysis. He was also instructed to report to the MOH Preventive Services Dentist.

The Medial Coordinator was also advised to guide and support the Dental Nurse in screening and recording.

A preventive procedure, particularly the use of fluoride varnish nationwide was discussed. All the teachers participating were enthusiastic to be trained to conduct the procedure and also to train the staff at their centers and other centers.

The Director of Head Start and the Preventive Dentist discussed on the cost and funding to implement on at least 3 big atolls in RMI. Fluoride Varnish has been applied on Majuro, the capital, and some outer islands that the Preventive Dentist visited in 2002.

The distribution of tooth brushes and fluoride tooth paste at Head Start Centers and daily supervision of tooth brushing was emphasized. The Preventive Services Dentist pointed out that the teachers and the staff who would be supervising would have to be given tooth brushing instructions so that the supervisions would be effective.

Discussions were made on changing the perception of parents that tooth brushing is not needed at home as it is done at school. It was decided that all children will receive a home visit by a HS teacher, where oral health care is explained to the care provider, including the importance of daily oral hygiene and appropriate snacking. This visit is aimed at encouraging self-reliance and personal responsibility and dispelling the idea that no preventive efforts are needed at home because they are carried out at school.

The Head Start Lunch was reviewed and as the availability of healthy foods was limited in RMI, the consultant suggested ways of providing healthy diet with less cariogenic recipes and also discussed ideas of adding Xylitol containing foods to HS diet and snacks. Another suggestion was to provide tooth brushes and fluoride tooth paste for home also. The Director of Head Start agreed to commence in the coming school year.

The participants from the outer island HS centers discussed about their difficulties in communication.

C. Community Awareness and Education

Discussions were made on the ways and means of getting the message through to the parents and other care providers on awareness and also to ensure good oral hygiene practices at homes.

With everyone's input, it was decided that it should be done by:

- Radio talks in Marshallese and English
- Monthly issues of news letter with Oral Health messages and information on healthy snacking
- Group meetings in the community
- HS Center meetings with parents and other care providers
- Oral Health Education messages in local TV channel

D. Training of Staff

Training of the Head Start Dental Nurse on preventive procedures was considered the first priority. The Preventive Services Dentist suggested that he should be sent to the Dental Department at the Majuro Hospital every Friday when pre-school children were seen for Fluoride Varnish applications and the school children for ART and other treatment.

Training the Head Start teachers and staff would be done every year at the Annual Meetings in the summer and on site at the centers when the Preventive Services dentist or the HS Dental Nurse visits the centers. The training will be on

- Performing effective teaching and supervision on tooth brushing.
- Empowering parents as key supporters by participating in mothers' meetings and PTA group meetings and take advantage of similar venues to explain to parents and other care providers the obligations of the HS program and try to change parents' expectations about oral health of their children.

In 2002 meeting, the Preventive Dentist made the presentation on the Prevalence of Early Childhood Caries in Majuro Head Start Children and introduced them to simple procedures such as mouth rinsing after snacks, tooth brushing with fluoride tooth paste and harmful effects of in-between meal snacks.

E. Development of Referral System

Formal referral procedures were reviewed so that all Head Start children who needed would receive appropriate dental treatment in the future, especially the children from outer islands and children with special health care needs. Ways and means of transportation were discussed and cost effectiveness of referrals was considered.

III. Next steps

Resources

The government of RMI is the major agency for funding the Dental Preventive Programs through the Ministry of Health.

MCH block grant for the Ministry of Health also contributes for the Preventive Services in RMI.

At present, HSP provides tooth brushes and Fluoride tooth paste for all enrollees. It was agreed that in the coming school year, tooth brushes and paste would also be provided for their home use.

In 2002, Fluoride Varnish was ordered for the centers in Majuro and it was decided that HSP will order Fluoride Vanish for all the enrollees and at least 3 applications would be done during that year in most of the centers.

All the material needed for the education of parents and awareness of the community would be funded by the HSP.

Challenges

- The greatest challenge for RMI is the remoteness of islands and atolls. There are 47 Head Start centers on 23 atolls and islands which are scattered over 750,000 square miles of ocean. To reach over 1200 children enrolled in HS program, especially those in the outer islands is cumbersome. Most of the outer islands are served by air service, but remain relatively isolated. To deal with those challenges, it was decided by the participants at the forum to train all teachers working at the Head Start Centers on effective tooth brushing and application of Fluoride Varnish, so that they can perform oral health care and preventive procedures at their centers by themselves.

- Isolation of oral health component of the Head Start is another challenge. The dental nurse in Head Start has been unsupervised and untrained in preventive procedures and has had no access to appropriate oral health expertise. No clinical facilities were made available for the Head Start Program. This challenge would be overcome by sending the nurse to the Majuro Hospital Dental Clinic every Friday for training and to order a complete dental operative for the Head Start Program at the main Head Start Center.
- There is no electricity in most of the outer islands, which makes it difficult to send the dental nurse for restorative treatment. This challenge was discussed and decided that the best option for islands near Majuro and Ebeye would be to send the referrals to those hospitals and for the other remote areas the Preventive Services Dentist suggested that when the Dental Team visits those islands, excavation and temporary fillings or ART would be done for the Head Start children.
- There is an extraordinary high level of dental caries in the preschool population in RMI and the parents of Head Start enrollees have come to accept the poor oral health of their children as normal. Thus, there has been little pressure by the stakeholders to change the situation. To meet this challenge, the consultant suggested development of materials for parents that are in Marshallese and at a very low reading comprehension level and that University of Washington might be able to help developing them. All the participants agreed on translating the appropriate materials selected by the consultant and the Preventive Services Dentist into Marshallese and putting them up at the centers and distributing them to the parents and other care providers.

IV. Acknowledgements

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