



Dental Public Health Project Descriptive Report Form

Name of Project
Smiles for Life: A National Oral Health Curriculum
Executive Summary
<p><u>Smiles for Life: A National Oral Health Curriculum</u> is a comprehensive, peer-reviewed oral health curriculum for primary care clinicians. It was developed for family physicians in 2005 by the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine Group on Oral Health and expanded to include other primary care clinicians (physician assistants, nurses and nurse practitioners, midwives, medical assistants, pharmacists, and front-line healthcare workers). The curriculum is available online as web-based interactive courses. There are nine one-hour modules which cover core areas of oral health. They are available both online and as downloadable PowerPoint files which can be used in a train the trainer fashion. All courses are free and available for continuing education credit. Smiles for Life represents a best practice due to its national scalability, interprofessional approach, demonstrated impact on clinician knowledge, and ability to integrate oral health into primary care settings without requiring major system redesign.</p>
Name of Program or Organization Submitting Project
Smiles for Life

Detailed Project Description

Project Overview

Primary care clinicians across disciplines want to know more about how to improve the oral health of their patients but are not receiving robust training in oral health care. For example, a [2018 survey](#) of family medicine residency directors found that only 31% of residency programs offer more than 4 hours of training in oral health and one in five programs offer no oral health training. According to 2016 surveys of primary care clinical faculty, less than 25% of them felt they had the expertise to teach oral health principles.

Smiles for Life was initially developed in 2005 by the [Society of Teachers of Family Medicine](#) Group on Oral Health to help bridge this gap for providers. Our target population is primary care clinicians desiring additional education on a broad range of oral health topics that might affect their patients. This includes physicians, physician assistants, nurses and nurse practitioners, medical assistants, pharmacists, and midwives.

One of the goals of *Smiles for Life* is to provide free access to peer-reviewed oral health education for all primary care clinicians wanting to learn more about their patients' oral health, in addition to management strategies such as application of fluoride varnish and silver diamine fluoride, good oral examination and identification of common oral lesions, and counseling on proper preventive care and oral hygiene. Courses focus on appropriate referrals to oral health professionals when indicated. *Smiles for Life* courses improve clinicians' ability to recognize, assess, and manage common oral health conditions, while emphasizing the strong connection between oral health and systemic health across the lifespan.

Smiles for Life aims to promote **preventive care**, including patient education on hygiene, diet, and risk behaviors, and to strengthen skills in performing oral examinations and identifying oral abnormalities. In addition, the curriculum supports interprofessional collaboration by encouraging coordination between medical and dental providers and seeks to expand access to oral health services by empowering non-dental clinicians to play a more active role in oral health screening, counseling, and referral. Overall, the goal is to improve patient outcomes by making oral health a routine and integrated part of comprehensive healthcare.

Some of the most important lessons the *Smiles for Life* team has learned through our journey from 2005 until today are to start with clear goals in an area of need, form and sustain a team with a shared vision around those goals and set a realistic timeline for development of curriculum. Putting together a multidisciplinary team, with representatives from each group of providers included in the curriculum, ensured that our group could best meet the educational needs of our target audiences.

One of the challenges our team faced was finding a sustainable funding plan. Because we want to offer our education without barriers to anyone who needs it, we feel strongly that we should not charge for our courses. We avoid the appearance of commercial bias, meaning we avoid sponsors that could give this impression. So far, we have been fortunate enough to find partners that share our vision of oral health education, and who have been willing to donate to this vision, which means that we choose not to pursue some "traditional" funding streams, which takes time, effort, and partnership to develop.

Resources, Data, Impact, and Outcomes

To create and manage our curriculum, we developed a multi-disciplinary team of healthcare professionals with expertise in and enthusiasm for oral health education. We offer nine courses on oral health topics. Each course is authored/reviewed by both a primary care clinician and a dental provider with expertise in the module topic. These authors are volunteers who are passionate about oral health education and are willing to share their knowledge with others. In addition to the course authors, we have an editor in chief that helps keep the courses up-to-date and sets priorities for the year, while our treasurer manages our finances. The only paid members of our organization are the editor and the treasurer.

Much of our yearly budget goes toward maintaining the *Smiles for Life* website and ensuring it runs smoothly, which includes maintaining our database. Through our database, we collect **process measures** on how many users we have each year, which professions are represented in course use, which states and countries are using our curriculum, and feedback on how effective our education is.

We collect **outcome measures** in the form of a pre- and post-test, to ensure users are learning key points from our courses. This data is collected annually and disseminated to the group

through our **annual report**. While our annual report is intended for internal use among the *Smiles for Life* organization, we do sometimes provide it to interested parties upon request. This report helps determine priorities for the upcoming year. We also use data collected from our users to generate reports on demand for organizations that are trying to ascertain what oral health education might be needed in a certain area of the country or within a particular institution.

Since the launch of our on-line site in June 2010, we have had 280,746 registered users on our platform. In the last five years, we have had more than 20,000 new users per year, representing both students and professionals in practice. About 70% of our users are from North America (including all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and Canada), but we also have users in 204 countries or territories outside North America. Professionals using *Smiles for Life's* online courses include physicians, physician assistants, nurses and advanced practice nurses, medical assistants, dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants, pharmacists, midwives, nutritionists, and therapists (PT/OT/ST). Additionally, we offer a downloadable course specifically geared for community health workers.

In 2025 alone, *Smiles for Life* users completed a total of 64,190 courses for continuing education (CE) credit. We also offer our courses for download – these include both slides and speaker notes and can be used for group educational sessions. In 2025, our courses were downloaded 1,925 times. Because we do not mandate that users disclose how they are using these courses, we do not have an estimate of how many additional users may have received training through access to our downloadable courses.

Smiles for Life has been featured in more than forty scholarly publications since our inception in 2005. Our courses have also been used for accreditation in fluoride varnish application and training on oral health topics by numerous organizations.

Budget and Sustainability

Smiles for Life currently runs on a budget of about \$200,000 annually. Most of this budget goes toward curriculum development, maintenance of continuing education credit, and website maintenance. We have been funded through grants from non-commercial partners such as Arcora Foundation, CareQuest Institute for Oral Health, and Delta Dental Foundation. We have a finance committee comprised of *Smiles for Life* members that help look for funding opportunities with like-minded partners to keep the project sustainable into the future.

Resources

All our resources can be found on our website, www.smilesforlifeoralhealth.org. This includes our curriculum, handouts and posters, patient education materials, and practice tools for primary care providers.

Hummel J, Phillips KE, Holt B, Hayes C. Oral Health: An Essential Component of Primary Care. Seattle, WA: Qualis Health; June 2015.

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