The Virtual Dental Home
Fact Sheet

What is the virtual dental home (VDH)?

The VDH is a community-based oral health delivery system in which people receive dental diagnostic, preventive and early intervention services in community settings. It uses telehealth technology to link allied dental professionals in the community with dentists in dental offices and clinics, facilitating access to the full dental team and comprehensive dental care.

How does a VDH dental care system work?

The VDH model relies on community-based practice of specially trained dental hygienists and assistants who collect dental records and provide preventive care for patients in community settings, such as schools, Head Start preschools and nursing homes. They send that information through a secure telehealth system to a dentist at a clinic or dental office who establishes a diagnosis and creates a dental treatment plan. In addition to preventive procedures, the hygienist or assistant, if directed to do so by the dentist, may provide a type of small protective filling called an “interim therapeutic restoration” (ITR), stabilizing the tooth until the dentist determines that further treatment is required. Patients who require more complex treatment that only a dentist can provide are referred and receive assistance securing a dental appointment.

How does the VDH improve access to dental care?

The VDH reaches people where they live, work or receive educational or social services, significantly reducing the need to travel to receive dental care. In a six-year demonstration project by the Pacific Center for Special Care at the University of the Pacific, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry (Pacific), approximately two-thirds of the patients seen in a VDH were able to receive the care they needed at the community site. This is care they most likely would not have received otherwise or would have had great difficulty getting.

What are the benefits and savings?

Dental disease is the No. 1 chronic disease of children – more common than obesity and asthma, and it is almost entirely preventable. For children, providing access to preventive services early in their lives inhibits the initiation of dental disease and provides a lifetime of benefits. When children are free from active dental disease, they miss fewer days of school and are better able to learn. They also enjoy the benefits of higher-quality nutrition and experience improved self-esteem.

For elders, especially those who live in a residential facility, they benefit from receiving dental services that will keep their mouths clean and pain free. In instances where more complex care is required and a trip to the dental office is scheduled, the VDH system minimizes the number of visits required, as the patients’ needs have already been assessed and the dentist is prepared to provide the required treatment.

The cost of neglect is substantial to individuals and to society. By reducing barriers to preventive and basic dental care in these vulnerable populations, the VDH model can provide long-term savings by avoiding costly procedures, emergency room visits and even hospitalizations associated with advanced dental disease.

For more information about the virtual dental home system, please visit: http://www.virtualdentalhome.org