

PA Student Perceptions of Oral Health Education Training

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COLLEGE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS



INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the United States Department of Health and Human Services issued the groundbreaking report, *Oral Health in America: a Report of the Surgeon General*.¹ This report underscored the widespread disparity of dental care among Americans and the integral connection between oral and chronic systemic diseases. It highlighted multiple reasons for these disparities including limitations of dental insurance and/or the absence of dental insurance affecting underserved populations.² In addition, the report stressed the reality of a national dental provider shortage, as well as shortage of primary health care providers educated in oral health.

The American Dental Association has ranked the state of Georgia as 49th in the country for number of dentists per residents, at a ratio of 4.2 dentists per 10,000 residents.³ Given this extraordinary shortage, it is critical that PA students trained in Georgia be educated in performing oral health risk assessment, patient education, and appropriate dental referral.

In order to meet this mission, the Mercer University Department of Physician Assistant Studies incorporated a comprehensive oral healthcare curriculum into the program (**Figure 1**).⁴⁻⁶ A pilot research project was created to evaluate and assess the students' perceptions of this oral health curriculum and its impact on them.

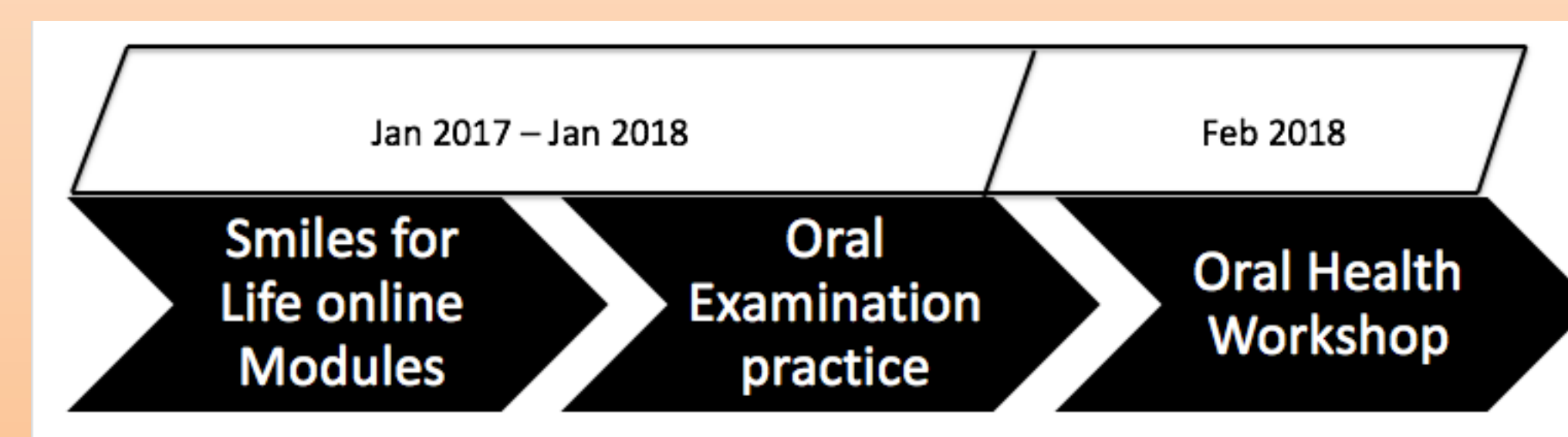


Figure 1: Oral Health Education Timeline

METHODS

Oral health training was launched during the first semester of the didactic year in January 2017. The *Smiles for Life* Oral National Health Curriculum was placed into already existing courses which most closely aligned with each oral health topic (**Table 1**).

Following completion of the *Smiles for Life* online training modules, students completed an Oral Health Workshop focused on 4 patient cases (Pediatric, Adult, Women's Health patient, Geriatric patient).

Every PA student in the Class of 2019 was asked to voluntarily complete a questionnaire regarding his or her perception of oral health education training. The questionnaire was developed with Likert-style questioning utilizing a 5-point scale. For data analysis, respondents reporting "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" were combined and respondents reporting "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree" were combined.

Smiles for Life Online Module	Mercer University PA Program Course	Module	Semester
The Oral Exam	Physical Diagnosis & Lab (PA 580)	HEENT	Spring 2017
Adult Oral Health	Clinical Medicine I (PA 581)	HEENT	Summer 2017
Acute Dental Problems	Clinical Medicine I (PA 581)	HEENT	Summer 2017
Relationship of Oral & Systemic Health	Clinical Medicine I (PA 581)	HEENT	Summer 2017
Caries Risk Assessment Fluoride Varnish & Counseling	Clinical Medicine I Lab (PA 581)	Lab	Summer 2017
Pregnancy & Woman's Oral Health	Clinical Medicine II (PA 582)	OBGYN	Fall 2017
Child Oral Health	Clinical Medicine III (PA 584)	Pediatrics	Spring 2018
Geriatric Oral Health	Clinical Medicine III (PA 584)	Geriatrics	Spring 2018

Table 1: Smiles for Life Curriculum integration

RESULTS

48 out of 60 students completed the questionnaire. Over 70% of the students agreed that the oral health education improved their understanding of oral health and disease (77.1%). After completing oral health education training, a majority of students felt confident in their knowledge of basic oral health (66.7%) and basic oral disease (66.7%), as well as appropriately trained to complete an oral examination on patients (54.2%). Most students agreed that oral health education should be added to the curriculum at Mercer University (68.8%), while only a small percentage did not feel it should be incorporated (10.4%).

CONCLUSION

It was hypothesized that the students would perceive the oral health curriculum positively. The findings confirmed this hypothesis by demonstrating that the majority of the students felt they had strengthened their oral health knowledge and were prepared to apply this knowledge in a clinical setting. In addition, the majority of the students were in favor of continuing this education in the future PA curriculum.

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