Oral Medicine: Defining an Emerging Specialty in the United States


Abstract: Oral medicine is a specialized area of study within the scope of dental medicine. This discipline is often viewed as the crossroads between medicine and dentistry and has become integral in both pre- and postdoctoral dental education. Oral medicine is recognized as a dental specialty throughout most of the world and currently represents an emerging specialty in the United States. Historically, oral medicine has been loosely defined in the United States without a clear consensus definition. Recent published studies regarding international oral medicine postdoctoral programs and clinical practice have helped to provide more specific information regarding oral medicine from many perspectives. This article will review the literature relevant to defining oral medicine in the United States and present a new definition of this important discipline based on recent studies.

Keywords: oral medicine, dental education, graduate dental education, clinical education, clinical practice

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Oral medicine as a defined area of study is largely credited to the work of Dr. Lester Burket. Dr. Burket served as dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine from 1951 to 1972. He was the author of the seminal oral medicine textbook that bears his name and is considered by many to be the father of oral medicine in the United States. Since that time, oral medicine as a focused area of study has been thoroughly integrated into dental school curricula throughout the world, including the United States. Clearly, there are newly understood patterns connecting oral health and systemic health and recognition of the potential impact of oral health on systemic conditions.

Although oral medicine is a recognized specialty in many countries, this discipline remains an emerging specialty in the United States. A recent international survey found that thirty-three of thirty-seven countries (89 percent) reported oral medicine as a recognized specialty, a distinct field of study, or an actively developing specialty/distinct field of study. This article presents a review of the literature supporting oral medicine as an emerging specialty in the United States by defining it based upon recent reviews of the scope of global postdoctoral training and clinical practice.

Background

Historically, various definitions for oral medicine have been proposed. We suggest that the broadest way to define oral medicine is the area of study at the intersection of medicine and dentistry. Another definition of oral medicine proposed by...
the American Academy of Oral Medicine is the discipline of dentistry concerned with the oral health care of medically compromised patients and the diagnosis and nonsurgical treatment/management of medically related disorders or conditions affecting the oral and maxillofacial region. Oral medicine is often regarded primarily as a non-surgical dental specialty that includes diagnosis, physical evaluation, and therapeutic management of medically related oral disorders. These disorders include salivary gland disease, oral complications resulting from systemic disease, chemosensory and neurologic impairment of the oral and maxillofacial complex, orofacial pain disorders, temporomandibular disorders, and oral mucosal diseases. An oral medicine clinician often will treat symptoms related to salivary gland dysfunction such as dry mouth; viral, bacterial, and fungal infections of the oral cavity; soft and hard tissue lesions of the oral cavity; oral mucosal diseases; oral changes related to systemic disease; headache disorders; maxillofacial sensory or movement disorders; burning mouth disorders; orofacial pain disorders including trigeminal and other neuralgias; and oral complications from cancer and/or radiation therapy. Patients are referred to oral medicine practitioners by health care providers in general dentistry and the dental specialties, as well as in primary care medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, dermatology, otorhinolaryngology, neurology, rheumatology, ophthalmology, oncology, radiation oncology, and others for various oral and maxillofacial conditions.

Over the last several years, dental schools have adopted educational standards that must be met as part of the institutions’ accreditation process, some of which directly relate to topics in oral medicine. Curriculum guidelines have been outlined for oral medicine postdoctoral training programs. Recently, the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) has approved advanced general dentistry in oral medicine standards with which all accredited training programs in the United States must be in compliance. These standards form the basis of this distinct area of study, and many highly trained individuals have completed oral medicine postdoctoral training programs in the United States.

Discussion

The question we are attempting to answer is this: what is the definition of oral medicine? Oral medicine can and should be defined based upon the specialized level of clinical practice that is driven by the training in that discipline. Recently, two articles have been published investigating both global postgraduate training standards and the clinical practice of oral medicine. At the intersection of these studies lies the true definition of oral medicine, and it is therefore, with this level of understanding, that we can define this emerging specialty in the United States.

In a recent international study, educators and practitioners from several countries were surveyed regarding postgraduate oral medicine training as a distinct area of study. In responses to questions regarding curricular content, the results of the study showed considerable congruency in the content of oral medicine syllabi. This study provided the first evidence regarding oral medicine postgraduate training on an international level. In this study, several countries identified themselves as having postgraduate oral medicine as a distinct field of study. Out of twenty respondents, 100 percent reported that they evaluated competence in the diagnosis and management of oral mucosal diseases. Furthermore, 95 percent of the respondents assessed competence in diagnosis and management of the salivary gland disorders. Seventy percent or more of all the respondents noted that oral medicine training to the level of competence included (among those already listed) the diagnosis and management of orofacial pain disorders, oral pathology, laboratory medicine pertinent to oral diseases, general medicine pertinent to oral diseases, advanced radiological assessment (appropriate ordering and interpretation), diagnosis and management of oral chemosensory disorders, and the dental management of the medically complex patient. This study included respondents from countries where oral medicine is a recognized specialty as well as areas where oral medicine training is a distinct field of study.

In another recently published study, international oral medicine clinical practice was surveyed and analyzed. Interestingly, the data collected suggested the scope of oral medicine practice parallels the training described in the previous study. Clinicians practicing oral medicine were asked about the portion of their clinical practice spent diagnosing and managing patients with specific oral medicine conditions. Nearly 90 percent of the respondents considered management of oral mucosal diseases, salivary dysfunction, oral manifestations of systemic conditions (dermatoses, human immunodeficiency virus [HIV], gastrointestinal and rheumatologic disorders), and facial pain in the definition of oral medicine. In addition, the largest portion of the
respondents stated the most common type of oral medicine conditions treated were oral mucosal lesions followed by orofacial pain and management of oral manifestations related to systemic dermatoses.

If a specialty is defined by its training parameters and clinical practice patterns, oral medicine's true definition becomes evident from the findings of these two studies (Table 1). Oral medicine practitioners diagnose and treat a wide variety of conditions of the maxillofacial complex and oral cavity including oral mucosal diseases, orofacial pain conditions, temporomandibular disorders, salivary gland disorders, xerostomia, and oral complications related to cancer treatments and may also provide dental care for patients with complex medical problems.

**Conclusion**

Based on evidence from recent international studies analyzing both oral medicine postgraduate training and clinical practice, the definition of oral medicine has become more concise. Therefore, we recommend that oral medicine in the United States be defined as the discipline of dentistry concerned with the oral health care of medically complex patients, including the diagnosis and primarily nonsurgical treatment and/or management of medically related conditions affecting the oral and maxillofacial region. Due to the scope and breadth of this discipline, we also urge that strong consideration be given to changing its name from oral medicine to oral and maxillofacial medicine.

**REFERENCES**