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Harmonizing the Standard for Care for Dependent Elders in Europe

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Life expectancy in western countries continues to increase, leading to a larger number of old and very old persons in the population. Advanced age often goes along with multimorbidity, frailty and an increased dependency for the activities of daily living. Polypharmacy often creates symptoms of a dry mouth as side effect, which increases the risk for caries and impairs mastication, speech and denture wearing. Thanks to advances in dentistry and prevention, today's dependent elders retain their natural dentition until later in life. This presents a particular challenge in their oral health care, as a more complex hygiene and prevention regimen is required, compared to an edentate mouth. An e-Delphi project of the European College of Gerodontology involving dentists, geriatricians and dental hygienists has tried to develop a novel standard of oral health care in dependent elders, recommend oral hygiene methods and tools and define the need for further education. The consensus recommended an oral examination at the onset of dependency as well as regular check-up visits and oral hygiene sessions at 6-month intervals. Older people should brush their teeth twice/day and regularly clean interproximal spaces and oral mucosa. Dentures should be rinsed after meals and cleaned twice/day. The use of denture cleansing tablets was considered necessary. Dentures should be removed before sleeping and stored dry. Fluoride toothpaste should be used in elders with a concentration that is adapted to their caries risk. Electrical toothbrushes are considered a valuable asset, which is particularly appreciated by care givers. Regarding the knowledge and training in oral health care, experts from all the fields agreed that knowledge and training for diagnosis and management of oral health care for dependent older people should be provided during the undergraduate-, and structured postgraduate curricula, as well as in continuing education programmes.

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