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Caregivers' perceptions of access to dental care for children with Down Syndrome

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Background:

People with disabilities are affected by social and health inequalities, being difficult for them to receive dental care. Chile has the highest prevalence of Down Syndrome (DS) in Latin America, however, there are no studies that report the barriers to access dental care focused on these patients.

Objectives:

To identify the perceptions that caregivers have about barriers to accessing dental care for children with DS in Chile.

Methods:

A cross-sectional study was developed based on a validated online survey, containing 28 Likert-scale questions and 2 open-ended questions related to access to dental care and oral health knowledge. A convenience sample was used, which considered Chilean caregivers of people with DS aged 2–18 years. The link to the survey was sent out through DS-related organisations via social media and email. Responses to the open-ended question “What are the barriers/difficulties your child with DS has had in accessing dental care?” were analysed using a descriptive matrix on Excel. The Bioethics Committee of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile approved the study.

Results:

A total of 155 correctly answered questionnaires were received. Parents recognise shortage of trained professionals in DS is the main barrier to accessing dental care. Caregivers believe that patient behaviour management, patience and up-to-date knowledge are the major characteristics that dentists often lack. A number of caregivers reported no barriers, saying that their children are regularly cared for without distinction between the public and private health system. Children's behaviour also acts as a barrier when they are fearful, sensory hypersensitive or uncooperative with the treatment. The cost of dental treatment and the distance to dental practice also emerged as barriers.

Conclusion:

Caregivers of children with DS perceive economic, geographic, DS-related and professional-related barriers, the latter being the most frequent. Improving dentists' skills and knowledge of DS is a key challenge.

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