AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Ingrid Alfred Karam for Master of Science
Major: Epidemiology

Title: Assessment of determinants affecting the utilization of dental services: a cross-sectional study on elementary school children in Beirut.

Objective: To determine the barriers that prevent parents of elementary school children in Beirut from utilizing the needed dental services and assess their willingness to utilize more these services if insurance coverage becomes available.

Methods: The sample was conveniently selected from a previously collected data assessing oral health of elementary school children, aged from 6-11 years old in Beirut. From 575 parents who accepted and signed to be part of follow up research projects, 316 answered the questionnaire and constituted our sample. In this cross-sectional study, a financial analysis followed by a self administered questionnaire distributed to the parents constituted the sources of data collection. The financial analysis assessed the average cost of the most commonly used dental services in Lebanon. The questionnaire included the socio-demographic and socio-economic statuses of the parents and children in addition to other covariates such as the parents’ perception of their children oral health, the parents’ utilization of dental services and their awareness about the available dental care centers offering affordable treatments and finally the parents’ willingness to access more dental care if dental insurance becomes available.

Results: The utilization of dental services in the past 12 months was found to be positively associated with the parents’ age, their awareness of the presence of dental care centers offering affordable treatments and their children school type. It was also shown that private schools were attended by children who have more educated parents with a higher monthly income and health insurance coverage and with a better perception of their children oral health. However, these parents are less aware of the presence of dental care centers offering affordable treatments and their utilization of dental services is mainly restricted to private practice. DMFT index and plaque index representing the children oral health status were not found to be significantly associated with the utilization of dental services.
A better oral health was only shown to be associated with a good perception of it compared to general health. Education was found to be the major predictor of parents’ willingness to utilize more dental services if insurance becomes available. Parents with low socio-economic status preferred the basic coverage insurance plan while their other counterparts preferred the premium coverage plan. Results from our study showed that around 96% of the parents who did not utilize dental services in the past year are willing to change their attitude if dental insurance becomes available.

**Conclusion:** Parents whose children attend private schools tend to utilize dental services almost twice more than parents who have their children enrolled in public schools. However, private schools parents are less aware about the presence of dental care centers offering affordable dental services than public schools parents. Moreover, parents’ educational level was the major predictor of their perception of oral health compared to general health and their willingness to use more dental services if dental insurance becomes available. In Lebanon, the implementation of public health policies such as the establishment of dental insurance coverage is a must. The lack of dental insurance is a major barrier for the utilization of dental services that are available at high and unaffordable costs.