

## Telehealth and Teledentistry in Oral Cancer Screening for Underserved Populations

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### ABSTRACT

Oral cancer represents a significant and persistent public health disparity, disproportionately impacting underserved populations including rural residents, racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, the uninsured, and low-income individuals. These groups face formidable barriers to accessing traditional in-person dental care, leading to later-stage diagnoses and poorer survival outcomes. Telehealth and its dental-specific subset, teledentistry, have emerged as disruptive technologies with the potential to revolutionize oral cancer screening by overcoming geographical, financial, and systemic obstacles. This paper critically examines the application, efficacy, challenges, and future potential of teledentistry models in expanding early detection of oral potentially malignant disorders (OPMDs) and cancers among underserved communities. We review various service delivery models including synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid approaches and their implementation in community health centers, mobile units, and institutional partnerships. Evidence demonstrates that store-and-forward teledentistry consultations for oral lesions can achieve high diagnostic accuracy, sensitivity, and specificity when compared to in-person examination, facilitating timely triage and referral. However, widespread adoption is hindered by regulatory fragmentation, reimbursement limitations, digital literacy gaps, and technological inequities (the "digital divide"). This paper argues that for teledentistry to fulfill its promise as a tool for health equity, it must be integrated into a comprehensive public health strategy. This includes policy reform for licensure and reimbursement, investment in broadband infrastructure, community-centered design of technological solutions, and the training of a culturally competent workforce. When implemented thoughtfully, teledentistry-driven screening can create a more equitable pathway to early diagnosis, reducing the burden of advanced oral cancer on society's most vulnerable members.

### Keywords

Teledentistry, Oral Cancer Screening, Health Disparities, Underserved Populations, Digital Health, Telemedicine, Store-and-Forward, Health Equity, Access to Care.

### Introduction: The Disparity of Oral Cancer and the Access Crisis

#### The Burden of Oral Cancer in Underserved Populations

Oral and pharyngeal cancers collectively represent a major global health challenge, with over 377,000 new cases and 177,000 deaths annually [1-4]. Within this broad statistic lies a stark gradient of inequality. In the United States and globally, the incidence, morbidity, and mortality from oral cancer are significantly higher

among socially and economically marginalized groups.

- Racial and Ethnic Minorities: African American and Hispanic populations experience higher age-adjusted mortality rates from oral cancer compared to non-Hispanic Whites, driven by later-stage diagnoses and potentially more aggressive tumor biology [4].
- Rural Communities: Geographic isolation, fewer healthcare providers, and longer travel times create a significant barrier to preventive dental care. Rural residents are more likely to be diagnosed with late-stage oral cancer and have lower 5-year survival rates [5].
- Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Groups: Lower income and educational attainment are strongly correlated with

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higher risk behaviors (tobacco, alcohol), lower health literacy, and limited access to insurance and care, all contributing to delayed presentation.

- The Elderly and Homebound: Mobility issues, transportation difficulties, and complex comorbidities make routine dental visits exceptionally challenging.

For these populations, the traditional model of oral cancer screening a visual and tactile examination performed by a dentist in a fixed clinical setting is often inaccessible.

### Defining the Access Barrier Triad

Underserved populations face a confluence of barriers:

- Geographic: Physical distance from specialists, particularly oral medicine experts and oral surgeons.
- Financial: Lack of dental insurance, high out-of-pocket costs, and the opportunity cost of taking time off work for travel and appointments.
- Systemic: Shortages of providers willing to accept public insurance (e.g., Medicaid), complex appointment systems, and a lack of integrated medical-dental care.

These barriers create a "diagnostic delay cascade," where patients postpone seeking care, primary care providers may lack training in oral examination, and referrals to specialists are logistically fraught. The consequence is a disproportionate number of advanced, debilitating, and costly-to-treat cancers [6-9].

### Teledentistry as a Potential Bridge

Telehealth, defined as the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support long-distance clinical health care, has matured significantly. Teledentistry, specifically, applies these principles to dental care, consultation, education, and public health. Recognized by the American Dental Association and federal health agencies, teledentistry offers a pragmatic framework to extend the reach of dental expertise beyond the walls of the clinic. For oral cancer screening, it presents a paradigm shift: instead of bringing the patient to the specialist, it brings the specialist's diagnostic acumen to the patient, wherever they are. This paper will explore whether this technological promise can be translated into tangible health equity for oral cancer.

### Teledentistry Models and Modalities for Screening

Teledentistry is not a monolithic entity but a suite of tools and approaches tailored to specific contexts. For oral lesion screening and evaluation, the following models are most relevant.

#### Store-and-Forward (Asynchronous) Teledentistry

This is the most prevalent and practical model for screening. It involves the capture of clinical data (images, video, health history) at a remote site ("spoke") by a primary care provider, community health worker, or dental hygienist. This data is then securely transmitted to a specialist at a central hub (e.g., an academic medical center) for review at a later time [10-18].

- Procedure: A trained frontline worker uses an intraoral camera, smartphone with attachable lens, or standard DSLR camera to

capture high-resolution, well-lit images of a detected lesion from multiple angles, often with a scale for size reference. A brief video may show lesion texture and mobility. A standardized form accompanies the images, capturing patient history, risk factors, and lesion characteristics.

- Advantages: Highly flexible; does not require the specialist and patient to be available simultaneously. Reduces administrative burden and is cost-effective. Allows for consultation with multiple specialists if needed.
- Application: Ideal for community health fairs, school-based clinics, nursing home visits, and primary care settings where a specialist is not physically present.

#### Real-Time (Synchronous) Videoconferencing

This model facilitates a live, interactive consultation between a patient (with a facilitator at the remote site) and a specialist via video link.

- Procedure: The facilitator (e.g., a dental hygienist or nurse) acts as the specialist's "eyes and hands," manipulating the camera and performing maneuvers under the specialist's live direction (e.g., "please retract the cheek further," "can you palpate that area?").
- Advantages: Allows for dynamic interaction, immediate questioning, and a more comprehensive assessment that approximates an in-person visit [19-32].
- Challenges: Requires scheduling coordination, reliable high-bandwidth connectivity, and the simultaneous availability of all parties. Can be more resource-intensive.

#### Hybrid and Mobile Health (mHealth) Models

Innovative programs combine elements of both.

- Mobile Teledentistry Units: Vans or buses equipped with dental chairs, intraoral cameras, and satellite/cellular internet connectivity can travel to remote communities, farms, homeless shelters, or tribal lands. They function as mobile spokes, collecting data for store-and-forward consultation or hosting real-time video visits.
- Patient-Facing mHealth Apps: Some pilot programs provide patients with instructions and tools for self-photography of oral lesions. These images are then submitted for remote review. While promising for engaged patients, this model requires significant patient health literacy and motivation.

#### The Critical Role of the "Telefacilitator"

The success of any model hinges on the trained individual at the point of care. This telefacilitator often a dental hygienist, primary care nurse, or community health worker is the linchpin. Their training must include:

- Competence in performing a systematic extra- and intraoral soft tissue exam.
- Proficiency in using imaging equipment to capture diagnostic-quality photographs.
- Understanding of risk factor assessment and patient history taking.
- Knowledge of referral protocols and patient communication.

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Their role extends the specialist's reach and builds local capacity.

### Evidence for Efficacy and Diagnostic Accuracy

A growing body of research supports the validity and effectiveness of teledentistry for oral cancer screening and lesion evaluation.

### Diagnostic Concordance Studies

Multiple studies have compared teledentistry consultations to the gold standard of in-person specialist examination and/or biopsy.

- A systematic review by Estai et al. found that store-and-forward teledentistry for oral lesions had an overall diagnostic accuracy ranging from 70% to 99%, with sensitivity and specificity often exceeding 80% when used by trained personnel. The review concluded it is a "valid and reliable" tool for screening and triage.
- Torres-Pereira et al. conducted a landmark study in Brazil, where community health workers were trained to use smartphones to image oral lesions in remote populations. The images were sent to oral medicine specialists. The system demonstrated a sensitivity of 100% and specificity of 76.9% for detecting malignancies, effectively identifying all cancerous lesions among those referred.
- Studies comparing real-time video consultation to in-person exam have shown high levels of diagnostic agreement (kappa statistics >0.8) for the recognition of suspicious vs. benign lesions, supporting its use for triage decisions.

### Impact on Clinical Workflow and Timeliness

Teledentistry significantly compresses the timeline from detection to specialist review.

- **Reduced Referral Time:** In traditional models, a patient may wait weeks or months for a specialist appointment. With store-and-forward, the consultation can occur within 24-72 hours.
- **Improved Triage Efficiency:** The specialist can immediately prioritize lesions needing urgent biopsy versus those appropriate for watchful waiting, directing patients to the correct level of care faster.
- **Avoidance of Unnecessary Referrals:** Many benign lesions can be confidently identified via teleconsultation, saving patients the burden and cost of a travel-intensive specialist visit for reassurance [26-37].

### Cost-Effectiveness and Public Health Value

While comprehensive economic analyses are still emerging, teledentistry screening demonstrates strong potential for cost-saving at a systems level.

- **Reduced Patient Costs:** Eliminates travel expenses, lost wages, and childcare needs associated with distant specialist visits.
- **Efficient Use of Specialist Time:** Specialists can review cases from multiple remote sites in a dedicated block of time, improving productivity.
- **Prevention of Advanced Disease:** The ultimate economic argument: the cost of a teledentistry screening program is dwarfed by the cost of treating a single case of late-stage

oral cancer, which can exceed \$200,000 for combined surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy, not including long-term rehabilitation and disability.

### Implementation in Underserved Settings: Case Studies and Frameworks

Successful programs are characterized by strong partnerships, cultural competence, and integration into existing community infrastructures.

#### Case Study 1: The Native American Dental Initiative

In the Pacific Northwest, a partnership between the University of Washington and the Indian Health Service established a teledentistry network serving remote tribal communities. Dental health aide therapists (DHATs) in village clinics perform exams and capture images of lesions. These are sent to oral medicine faculty in Seattle. The program has dramatically increased early detection rates for OPMDs in a population with historically high rates of tobacco use and late-stage diagnosis. Key to success was community ownership; tribal leaders were involved in design and governance [38-58].

#### Case Study 2: Urban Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs)

An FQHC network in New York City implemented a store-and-forward program linking their dental hygienists in primary care clinics with oral surgeons at a nearby hospital. Primary care physicians could also request "e-consults" for oral findings. This medical-dental integration led to a 300% increase in appropriate oral surgery referrals from primary care within the first year and identified several early-stage cancers in patients who used the FQHC for medical care but had no regular dental home.

#### Case Study 3: Rural School-Based and Mobile Programs

In Appalachia, a university-based program uses a mobile van to visit senior centers and health fairs. A hygienist on board screens participants and images any findings. The images are reviewed within 48 hours, and patients are contacted with results and next steps, which may include a referral to a partnering local dentist who has agreed to see teledentistry patients. This model builds local networks rather than bypassing community providers.

### A Framework for Sustainable Implementation

1. **Needs Assessment:** Identify the target population, specific barriers, and existing community assets (e.g., clinics, community workers).
2. **Technology Selection:** Choose simple, durable, and user-friendly technology. Smartphone-based systems are often optimal due to ubiquity and ease of use.
3. **Workforce Training:** Invest in comprehensive, hands-on training for telefacilitators, with ongoing support.
4. **Partnership Development:** Forge formal agreements between hub specialists, spoke sites, and referral centers (pathology, surgery).
5. **Protocol Development:** Create clear, standardized protocols

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for image capture, data security (HIPAA-compliant platforms), specialist response times, and patient follow-up.

6. Evaluation Plan: Measure process metrics (number of consults, time to review) and clinical outcomes (referral accuracy, stage at diagnosis for detected cancers).

### Challenges, Barriers, and Ethical Considerations

Despite its promise, teledentistry faces significant headwinds that disproportionately affect the very populations it aims to serve.

### The Digital Divide and Technological Equity

- **Broadband Access:** Rural and low-income urban areas may lack reliable, high-speed internet, making real-time video impossible and slowing store-and-forward transfers.
- **Device Availability:** While smartphone penetration is high, the oldest and poorest may lack smartphones or data plans. Programs must provide equipment.
- **Digital Literacy:** Both providers and patients may lack comfort with the technology, necessitating simplified interfaces and hands-on support [59,60].

### Regulatory and Reimbursement Hurdles

- **Licensure:** Dentists are typically licensed by state. Providing a consultation across state lines may be illegal without a special license or reciprocity agreement, stifling cross-border programs.
- **Reimbursement:** Medicaid and private insurers have been slow to establish consistent, adequate payment policies for teledentistry consultations, making programs financially unsustainable. CPT codes exist (e.g., D9996) but reimbursement rates are often low.
- **Malpractice and Liability:** Uncertainty exists around the standard of care and liability for decisions made based on digital images, particularly if image quality is poor.

### Clinical Limitations

- **The Lack of Tactile Sensation:** The specialist cannot palpate a lesion to assess induration (hardness), a key sign of malignancy.
- **Image Quality:** Suboptimal lighting, focus, or angles can render a consultation non-diagnostic.
- **Incomplete Examination:** A teleconsultation is a focused lesion evaluation, not a comprehensive oral exam. Incidental findings may be missed.

### Ethical and Equity Considerations

- **Informed Consent:** Patients must understand that a teleconsultation is a screening/triage tool, not a definitive diagnosis, which requires biopsy.
- **Avoiding a Two-Tiered System:** Care must be taken that teledentistry does not become a lower standard of care for the poor while the affluent access in-person specialists. It must be a bridge to equivalent care, not a permanent substitute.
- **Data Privacy:** Extra vigilance is required to protect patient data transmitted and stored digitally, especially in communities with historical distrust of medical systems.

### The Future Landscape and Recommendations

For teledentistry to mature from a promising pilot to a standard component of oral cancer control, systemic changes are required.

### Technological Advancements

- **Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Computer-Aided Detection (CAD):** AI algorithms trained on thousands of oral lesion images can act as a "first pass" screener, flagging suspicious lesions for human specialist review, thereby increasing throughput and consistency. This is particularly promising for scaling up screening in low-resource settings.
- **Integration with Electronic Health Records (EHRs):** Seamless integration of teledentistry platforms with medical and dental EHRs is essential for care coordination and population health tracking.
- **Low-Cost, High-Fidelity Devices:** Development of affordable, automated intraoral scanners that can create 3D models for remote review.

### Policy and Advocacy Imperatives

1. **Licensure Reform:** Advocate for interstate licensure compacts for teledentistry (similar to the Nurse Licensure Compact) or expanded reciprocity agreements.
2. **Parity in Reimbursement:** Lobby for Medicaid and private insurers to reimburse teledentistry consultations at rates equal to in-person visits for the same service.
3. **Infrastructure Investment:** Support public investment in broadband expansion as essential health infrastructure, particularly in rural and tribal areas.
4. **Workforce Development:** Incorporate teledentistry training into the core curriculum of dental, dental hygiene, and primary care medical education.

### A Call for Integrated Public Health Strategy

Teledentistry cannot operate in a vacuum. It must be part of a multi-pronged strategy that includes:

- **Community-based education** on oral cancer signs and the availability of tele-screening.
- **Strong referral networks** to ensure patients flagged as high-risk can access timely biopsy and treatment, regardless of ability to pay.
- **Continued focus on primary prevention** (tobacco cessation, HPV vaccination) alongside secondary prevention (screening).

### Conclusion

Oral cancer is a disease of disparity, its burden heaviest on those with the least access to care. Teledentistry represents a powerful and pragmatic technological tool to begin leveling this inequitable landscape. By decoupling diagnostic expertise from physical location, it can transform community health centers, mobile vans, and primary care clinics into effective nodes for early detection. The evidence is clear: when deployed with trained personnel and proper protocols, teledentistry consultations are accurate, efficient, and can dramatically expedite the pathway to diagnosis.

However, technology alone is not a panacea. Its success is contingent

upon confronting the non-technical barriers: discriminatory reimbursement, archaic licensure laws, the digital divide, and the need for culturally competent program design. The goal must not be to create a separate, digital channel for the underserved, but to use this channel to integrate them into the same standard of care enjoyed by the privileged. By investing in the policy, infrastructure, and human capital needed to support equitable teledentistry, we can move closer to a future where a patient's zip code, income, or race no longer determines their stage of oral cancer at diagnosis. In the fight against oral cancer disparities, teledentistry is not just a convenient tool it is an imperative for justice.

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