

Executive Summary

Susan C. Harris

Department of Doctorate of Nursing Program, Midwestern University

DRNPG 1507: Preventative Care Initiatives & Interprofessional Collaboration Assignment

Dr. Kelly Vandenberg

June 15, 2025

Executive Summary

Oral health care is a significantly overlooked component of rehabilitation for individuals recovering from substance use disorders (SUD). Despite the profound impact that poor oral health has on physical well-being, self-esteem, and quality of life, many outpatient and inpatient rehab programs fail to address it. Years of neglect, substance-related damage, and limited access to dental care often leave individuals in recovery with serious oral health issues. Yet, preventive dental education or support is not integrated into recovery programs.

The purpose of this Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) quality improvement project is to evaluate the impact of providing oral health care kits and targeted oral health education on oral health knowledge, hygiene practices, and self-esteem among adults receiving outpatient treatment for substance use disorder at a rehabilitation facility in Southern Arizona. The project aims to implement and assess an 8-week nurse-led intervention using a pre- and post-intervention design to improve measurable outcomes related to oral health and overall well-being in an underserved population.

The PICOT question guiding this project is: Among underserved adults in an outpatient substance use disorder rehabilitation program (P), how does providing oral health education and a preventive oral care kit (I), compared to no structured oral health intervention (C), affect oral health knowledge, hygiene practices, and self-esteem (O) over 8 weeks (T)?

A convenience sample of voluntary participants enrolled in the program will complete self-reported questionnaires at baseline and again after 8 weeks. Each participant will receive an oral health care kit containing essential hygiene items, such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, mouthwash, and lip balm, along with an educational brochure tailored to the SUD population. This intervention seeks to measure changes in oral health knowledge, daily hygiene routines, and self-esteem due to the combined education and kit distribution. This initiative addresses

neglected oral health in an underserved population by providing tools and education to promote regular oral hygiene. Designed to be low-cost, noninvasive, and replicable, the intervention also leverages therapeutic relationships between staff and participants to position oral care as a component of whole-person wellness.

The project will demonstrate that even small-scale, resource-conscious interventions can yield measurable outcomes. Participants are expected to show increased oral health knowledge, improved hygiene practices, and enhanced self-esteem. These changes emphasize the value of accessible education and basic preventive tools in supporting both health and recovery. This initiative represents a sustainable, nurse-led model adaptable to other underserved settings.

Looking ahead, oral health education should be embedded as a standard part of rehabilitation programming for individuals with SUD. Simple oral care kits and targeted education empower individuals to take ownership of their health. Self-reported questionnaires can track progress and help refine future interventions. Seeking collaborations with local dental providers may expand access through referrals or mobile services. Most importantly, this project reinforces that oral health is not a luxury but a basic need, and addressing it is an essential step toward improving health equity.

Oral health plays a crucial yet often ignored role in the recovery journey for individuals with substance use disorders. This project will demonstrate that individuals are capable and eager to improve their hygiene and self-care when given the right tools and support. The increase in self-esteem will speak volumes about the personal impact of this initiative. By recognizing and addressing oral health within the context of recovery, we can help reduce stigma, restore dignity, and support long-term wellness. This nurse-driven model is a promising step toward more holistic, equitable care—and it's ready to be scaled.