



### G34 Correctional Dentistry and Forensic Odontologists: Bridging the Gap

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the careers and challenges of the correctional dental team. There will be an analysis of the demands, need for service, and barriers faced.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how the United States correctional facilities could better utilize forensic odontologists in the interest of justice.

The United States incarcerates nearly 2.5 million inmates each year. With a substantial rise in substance abuse and criminality, the demands placed on correctional dentists is also increasing exponentially. As a practicing healing branch of medicine, the correctional dentist is faced with the legal and ethical responsibility of providing services to the inmate patient population while maintaining an appropriate standard of care; however, these dental teams are often working in extreme and substandard conditions. Dentists are frequently working with antiquated equipment and many institutions have yet to upgrade to digital radiography and electronic record keeping. There is a lack of consistency in security and medical management at different facilities. The dentists are attempting to work and provide treatment while simultaneously maintaining a sense of safety for themselves and support staff. There are limited, if any, studies available and minimal documentation of the harsh and warlike conditions in which dental care is being rendered. The shortage of dentists and security staff, as well as the marked increase in the level of violence within certain facilities, is creating such an environment. The potential ramifications for the dental provider in regard to the continuous and routine accessibility of the inmate to dangerous shanks and illegal substances will be examined. Institutions that incarcerate mentally ill offenders are faced with an entirely unique subset of challenges. This is setting the stage for risk, both professionally and personally, for the correctional dental providers. There are many medical health organizations bidding on contracts for the correctional health services; however, there is minimal input and/or advocacy from outside government agencies for the correctional dentist (Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA); Board of Dentistry).<sup>1-4</sup>

Forensic odontologists are called upon to assist law enforcement. They are rarely utilized in the correctional system where bitemarks routinely occur. Teeth become the common weapon, both by aggressors and as a line of defense. Officers, health care professionals, and inmates are all affected by this form of violence and victimization. There remains a culture of silence behind the walls. There are documented cases of corruption and abuse within the system, but no expression of the impact and the medicolegal risk that is placed upon the correctional dentist. Case and situational examples will be presented for review and discussion. In the local jail setting, there is generally a much more controlled environment. Yet again, there is increasing criminality and high recidivism. The requests for dental care exceed the funding that many institutions have allocated for dental services. Additionally, the offenders who are housed and released from these facilities are often the future accused, victims, and the missing/unidentified.

Attendees will recognize the expanding need for and challenges faced by correctional dentists. There is a missing link between the correctional dentist/system and forensic odontologist. By bridging the gap between the correctional system and the forensic odontologist, the correctional system can be educated to become integrated as part of the forensic team. This information will challenge the attendees to examine the role they may have in creating professional harmony.

#### Reference(s):

1. Elliot, Kuehl, Ghaziri, Cherniack. *Corrections Today, Stress and Corrections*. July/August 2015.
2. Niederman, Richards, Brands. The Changing Standards of Care. *JADA*. May 2012, Volume 143, 434-437
3. Florida Department of Corrections Media Releases.
4. *Miami Herald* (multiple articles 2015-present).

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#### Corrections, Dentist, Odontologist