

Dental Caries among Children in Bazartete, Timor-Leste and the impact of Maluk Timor School Outreach Program

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Abstract : The World Health Organization's 2022 Global Oral Health Status Report reveals a staggering statistic: more than 3.5 billion people, or half of the world's population, currently suffer from untreated oral diseases, encompassing issues like tooth loss, gum disease, and oral cancers. Among these, dental caries, commonly known as tooth decay, affects over 2.5 billion people globally. Dental caries result from acid erosion of teeth due to plaque build-up and consumption of free sugars. Despite being preventable through basic measures such as regular tooth-brushing with fluoride toothpaste and reduced sugar intake, untreated dental caries poses a significant and growing public health crisis. In children, dental caries stands as the most prevalent non-communicable disease worldwide, affecting 60-90% of school children to some extent. This condition severely impacts their physical, emotional, and social well-being, hindering essential activities and overall quality of life. Timor-Leste, a small nation in South-east Asia, grapples with the escalating problem of childhood dental caries, exacerbated by its unique challenges including poor access to healthcare services and limited resources. **Methods:** This study analysed Secondary, cross-sectional data collected by Maluk Timor in 2022 during the School Outreach Program. A total of 1,008 children aged 4-16 from eight primary schools in the Bazartete administrative post were examined for dental caries in their primary and permanent teeth. All students were invited to participate, and consent was obtained from parents and children. A team comprising one dentist and two dental nurses conducted health promotion sessions, dental examinations, and SDF treatment. A screening form based on WHO guidelines collected demographic data and caries diagnosis, categorized as decayed or healthy. Data analysis involved entering the data into Google Sheets, verifying its accuracy, and importing it into Microsoft Excel for analysis. Variables were created to identify students with carious lesions, and prevalence tables were generated, stratified by age group, gender, and location. **Results:** Among the 1,008 children analysed, 58.3% had dental caries. Caries prevalence was higher in primary teeth (36.7%) compared to permanent teeth (29.5%). **Conclusion:** In summary, this report highlights the alarming prevalence of dental caries among children in Timor-Leste and the efforts of Maluk Timor's School Outreach Program in addressing this critical issue. The results emphasize the need for effective preventive measures and improved access to oral healthcare in this region.

Keywords : dental caries, timor-leste, oral health, children, public health, primary health care, teeth

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