Defining oral health
The evidence summary is based on the original summary published in the BDJ (May 2010). It identifies, evaluates and summarises primary evidence that reports the views or perceptions of oral health of people living in UK deprived areas or households in comparison with those living in non-deprived areas or households. It does not include detailed descriptions of the studies cited nor does it include information that was not presented in the literature. This question formed the basis of a call for funding in 2010 and £88,000 was awarded for its research.

The Curious about website encourages dental professionals to raise issues where a review of the available evidence would provide a useful resource for other dental professionals. Where there is a lack of evidence, the topic is considered for research and an award is made available.

These activities are sponsored by the Shirley Glasstone Hughes Fund, a restricted fund within the BDA Trust Fund. The focus of the fund is research into primary dentistry and it aims to generate a body of relevant research for practicing dentists.
Key finding

• There is a clear gap in knowledge of the variations in individuals’ and communities’ perceptions of oral health.

Review question

This evidence summary was prepared in response to the following question: Do people living in deprived areas define oral health differently from people who live in less deprived areas?

Key terms

Deprived areas:
City, urban, rural or suburban areas which are characterised by relative economic impoverishment and by accompanying physical and social decay.

Oral health:
The optimal state of the mouth and normal functioning of the organs of the mouth without evidence of disease.

The case for action

A social gradient exists in both general and oral health, the lower a person’s social position the poorer their health, and the gap between those with good and poor dental health is widening.1-4 However dental services are not often utilised by the more deprived social groups5-9 and, unlike those in higher social groups, dental visits are often symptom driven.7

While a person’s oral health may be subject to their own personal values and attitudes8 their concept of oral health is influenced by various factors such as western society often defining “good” oral health as having straight, even and perfectly white teeth9. Aspects of oral health perception have been explored in relation to general health,10-13 specific population groups,11-14 quality of life,15 in people with differing dental health status16 and in those on social assistance.5 Those in the latter group were found to place a tremendous value on appearance and feel powerless to improve their oral health.5

The evidence

No studies were found that compared the perceptions of oral health among people from deprived areas with those from non-deprived areas in the UK. Nor were any studies found which just reported the perceptions of oral health of people in deprived areas in the UK.

This lack of evidence illustrates a gap in knowledge of the variations in oral health perception between those in deprived areas and those in less deprived areas. Understanding peoples’ views and attitudes to their oral health could be important in designing and supporting policies aimed at improving health.
Methods

Search strategy
The following resources were searched:

- Ovid MEDLINE
- Centre for Evidence Based Dentistry
- Cochrane Oral Health Group
- The Centre for Reviews and Dissemination
- American Dental Association
- TRIP database
- National Library for Public Health
- Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects NHS Evidence
- Social sciences databases (Science Direct, ASSIA (CSA), Web of Science, EBSCO, SwetsWise).

Search terms for Ovid MEDLINE were: socioeconomic factors or poverty areas; oral health, or attitude, or perception, or beliefs towards health, or self-concept; focus groups, interviews, questionnaires; UK. Studies were included if they collected data using open question approaches and analysed respondent’s perceptions using any index of socioeconomic status.

Individual journal searches included Evidence-Based Dentistry and the Journal of Evidence-Based Dental Practice.

Searches are current as of January 2010.

Results
No relevant publications were found

References