More Patients, More Care, Stronger Clinics: The Economic Case for Dental Therapy

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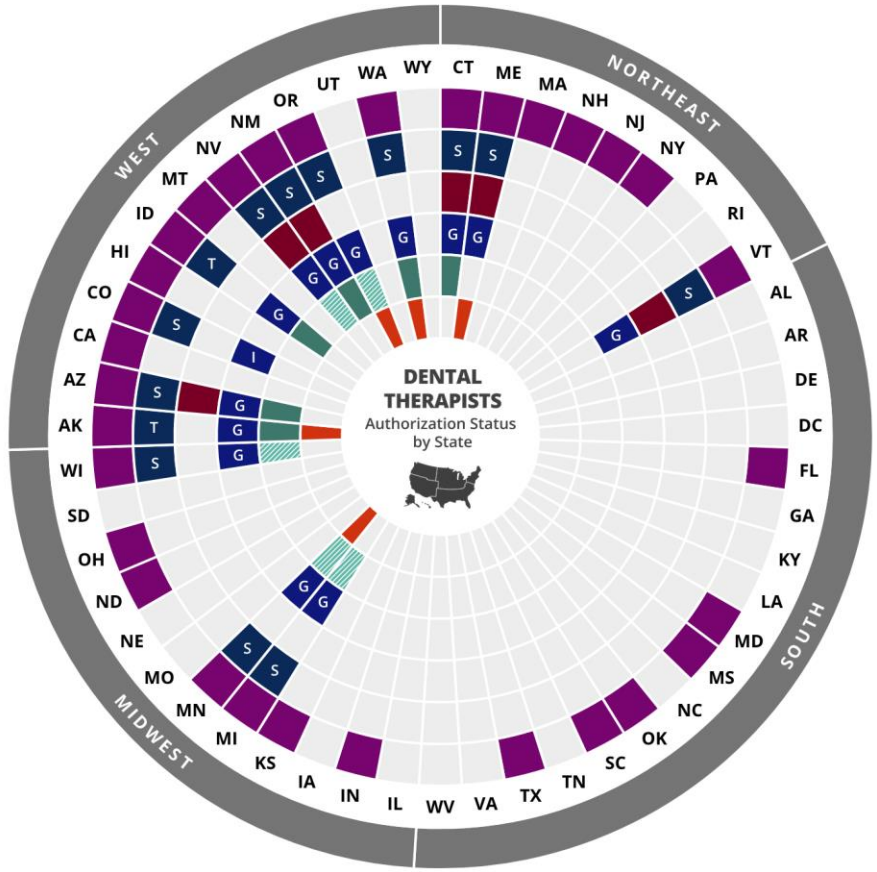
Introduction

- Dental therapists are trained to provide:
  - Preventive services traditionally performed by a dental hygienist
  - Selective restorative services traditionally performed by a dentist
- Dental therapy regulation often requires a certain percentage of practice within underserved communities or for low income populations
- Dental therapists practice in more than 50 countries worldwide but the model is relatively new in the US
- 14 states have passed legislation allowing for practice but currently dental therapists, but Minnesota has the longest experience with statewide implementation
  - Limited number of education programs
  - Some states allow practice only in native communities



Source: Authorization Status of Dental Therapists By State. Rensselaer, NY: Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, SUNY Albany; April 2024.

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Background

- A central question is whether integrating dental therapists into dental teams can increase access to care and organizational capacity while allowing dentists to focus on more complex services
- Apple Tree Dental in Minnesota is a large non-profit community dental provider that was among the first employers of dental therapists in early 2012
- Patients at Apple Tree Dental consist of all age groups, many of whom have special health care needs; the vast majority of their patients are low-income and Medicaid beneficiaries
- *Our study examined* encounter data to compare dentists' service mix, productivity, patient volume, and financial performance *before* and *after* the introduction of dental therapists at Apple Tree Dental

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Working with nearly 150 collaborating organizations, our teams deliver compassionate care to children, adults, and elders who face barriers to care at Head Start Centers, local schools, group homes for people with disabilities, assisted living centers, nursing facilities, and other sites.

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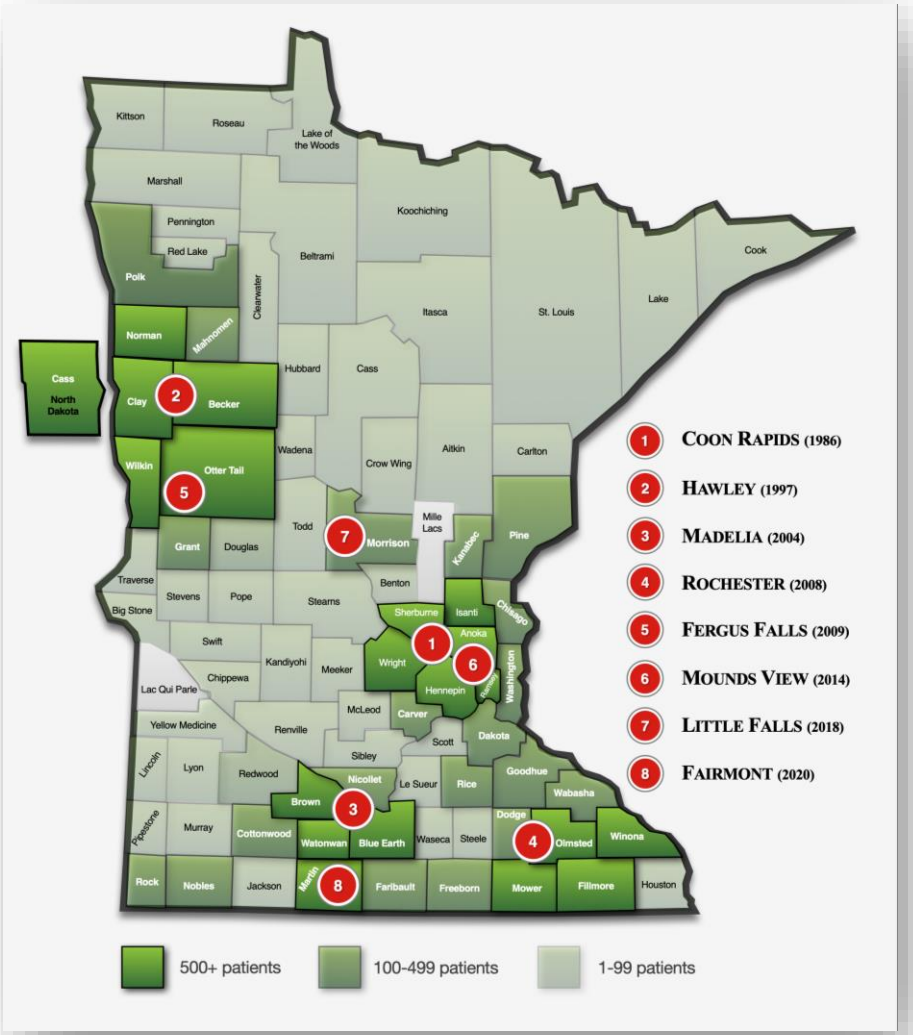
Methods - Data Source

This study used 10 years of encounter data (2009-2019) that included more than 250,000 visits by 76,342 patients across dental centers of Apple Tree Dental

The main analyses focused on 2 dental centers with 3 years of encounter data *before* the introduction of dental therapy and 7 years of *continuous experience* with dental therapists *after* implementation



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Methods - Outcome Measures



Volume and types of services provided by dentists as well as patient volume *before* and *after* introduction of dental therapists at Apple Tree Dental in early 2012



Changes in intensity and distribution of services described in terms of Relative Value Units (RVUs):

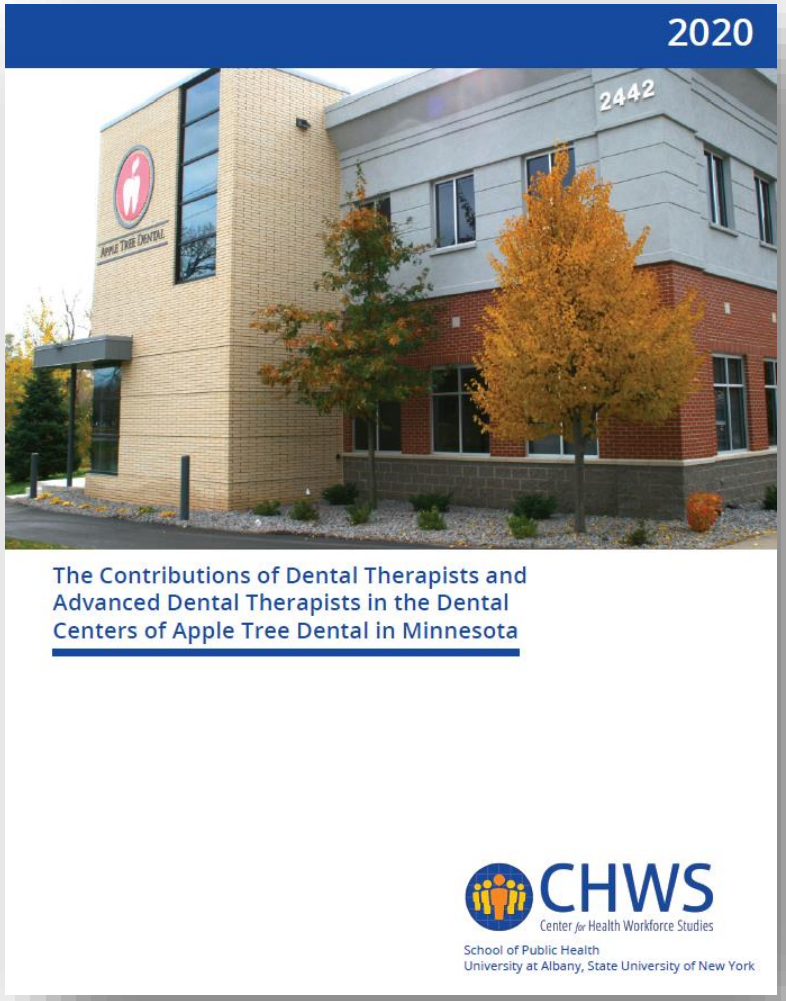
RVUs are sums of values attributed to various aspects of a dental procedure including the *extent of professional training, complexity of the skills necessary, and costs of resources*



Economic impact of dental therapy on organizational revenue using dental fees, adjusted to 2018 fee levels:

Standardized fee schedule for commonly performed dental procedures from the American Dental Association based on national surveys of dentists

Key Findings

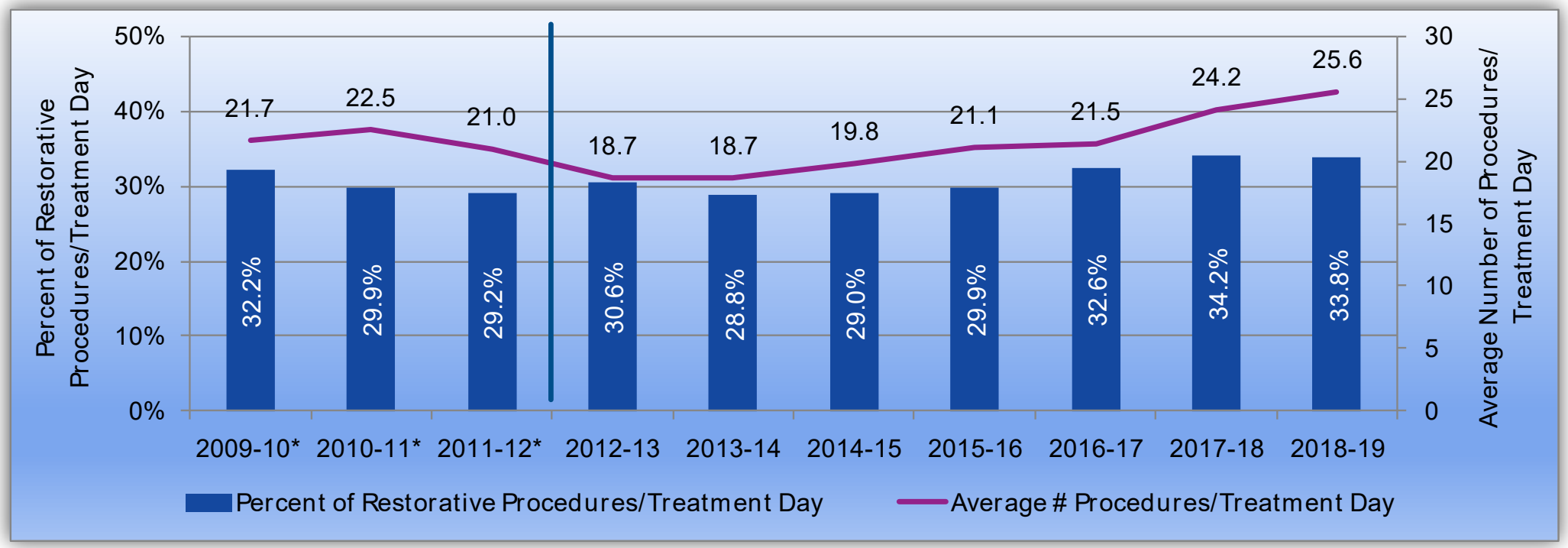


- During the 10-year study period, Apple Tree Dental employed 15 dental therapists, along with more than 30 dentists and 30 dental hygienists

Source: Langelier M, Surdu S, Moore J. *The Contributions of Dental Therapists and Advanced Dental Therapists in the Dental Centers of Apple Tree Dental in Minnesota*. Rensselaer, NY: Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, SUNY Albany; August 2020.

Trends in Procedures by Dentist Per Treatment Day

- Following the introduction of dental therapists, there was a significant increasing trend in procedures by dentist per treatment day and in the prevalence of restorative services
- Dentists provided 22% more procedures per treatment day than in the pre-dental therapy year



* Represents 3-year period preceding introduction of dental therapy.

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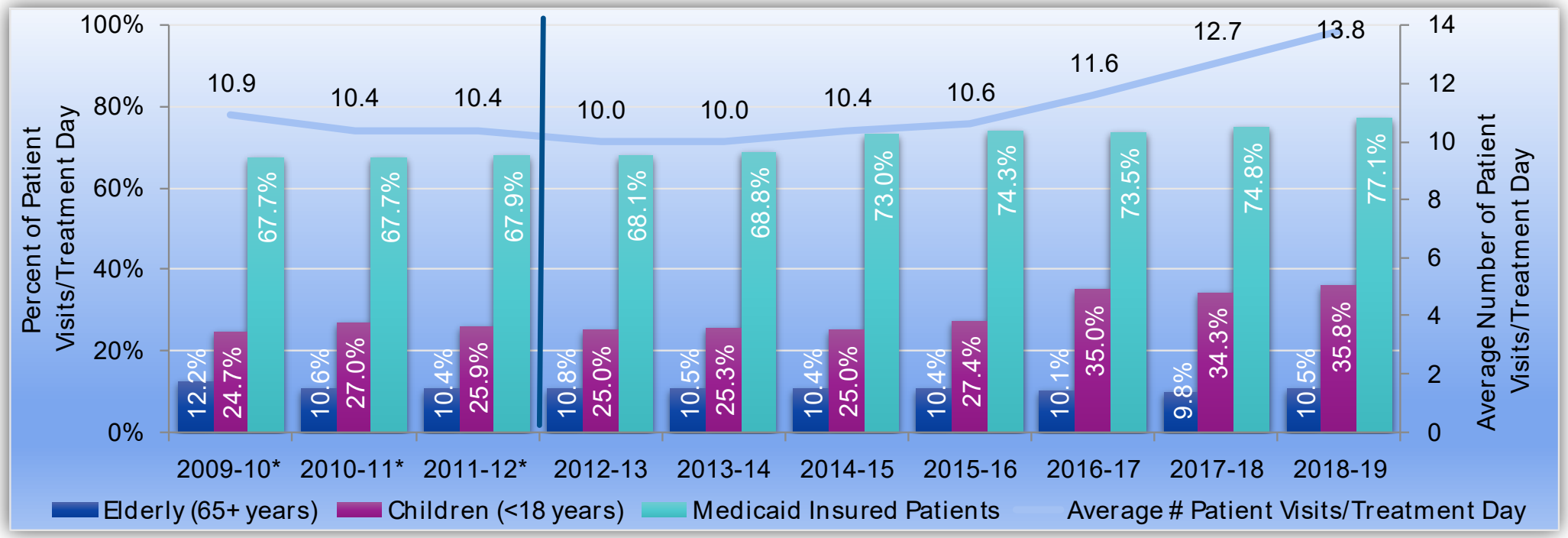
Trends in Patient Visits Seen by a Dentist Per Treatment Day

- Following the introduction of dental therapists, there was a significant increasing trend in patient visits per dentist treatment day and in the proportion of Medicaid beneficiaries receiving care
- Dentists saw 33% more patient visits per treatment day than in the pre-dental therapy year



* Represents 3-year period preceding introduction of dental therapy.

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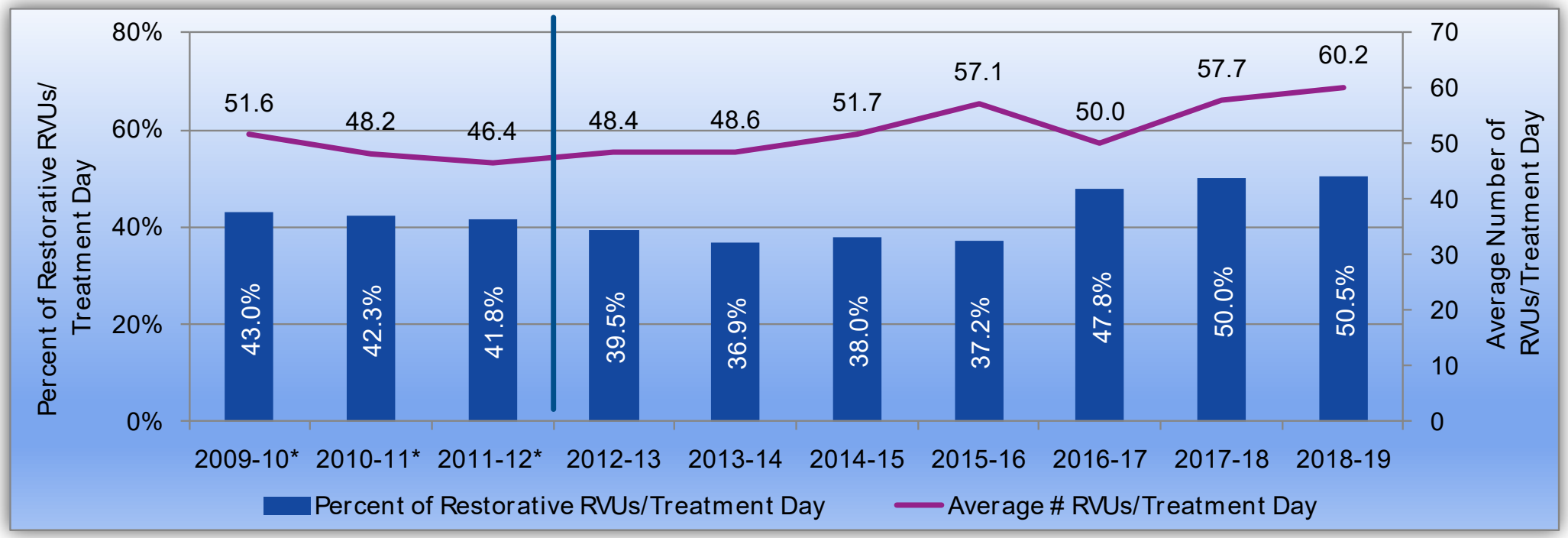
Trends in RVUs by Dentist Per Treatment Day

- There was also a significant increasing trend in RVUs by dentist per treatment day and in the proportion of RVUs generated by restorative services, particularly in the last 3 years of study
- Dentists generated 30% more RVUs per treatment day than in the pre-dental therapy year



* Represents 3-year period preceding introduction of dental therapy.

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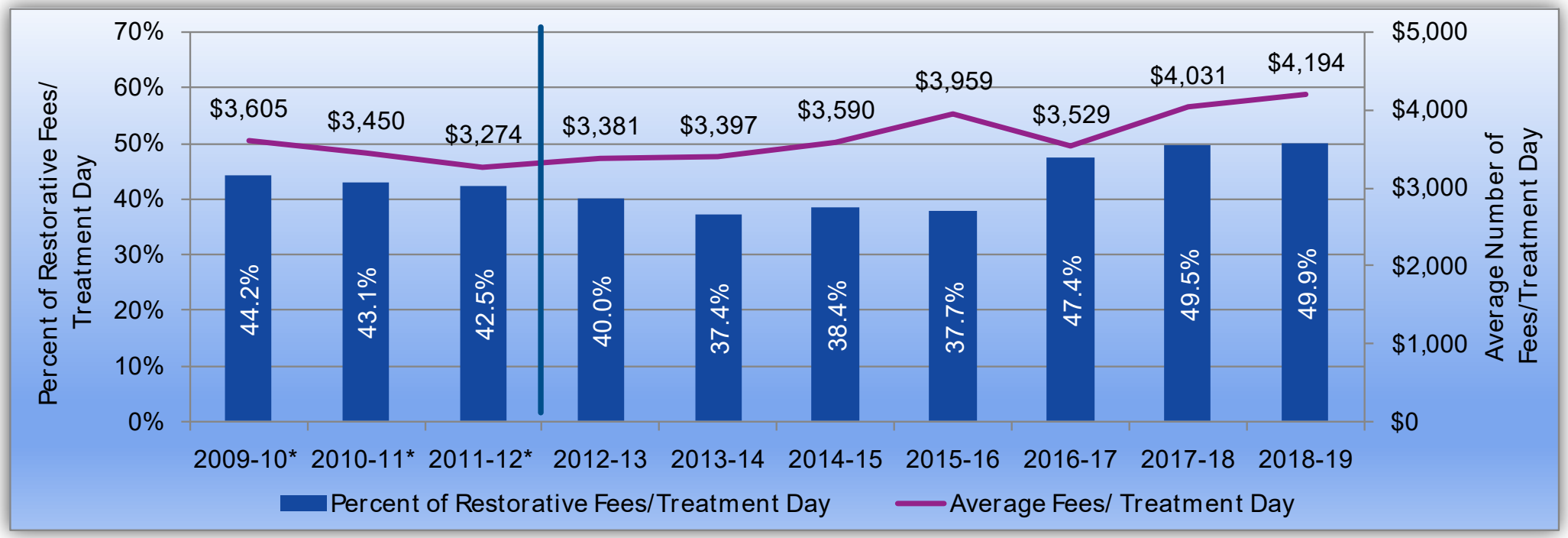
Trends in Fee Production by Dentist Per Treatment Day

- Similarly, there was a significant increasing trend in fee production by dentist per treatment day and in the proportion of fees generated by restorative services, particularly in the last 3 years
- Dentists generated 28% higher fee production per treatment day than in the pre-dental therapy year



* Represents 3-year period preceding introduction of dental therapy.

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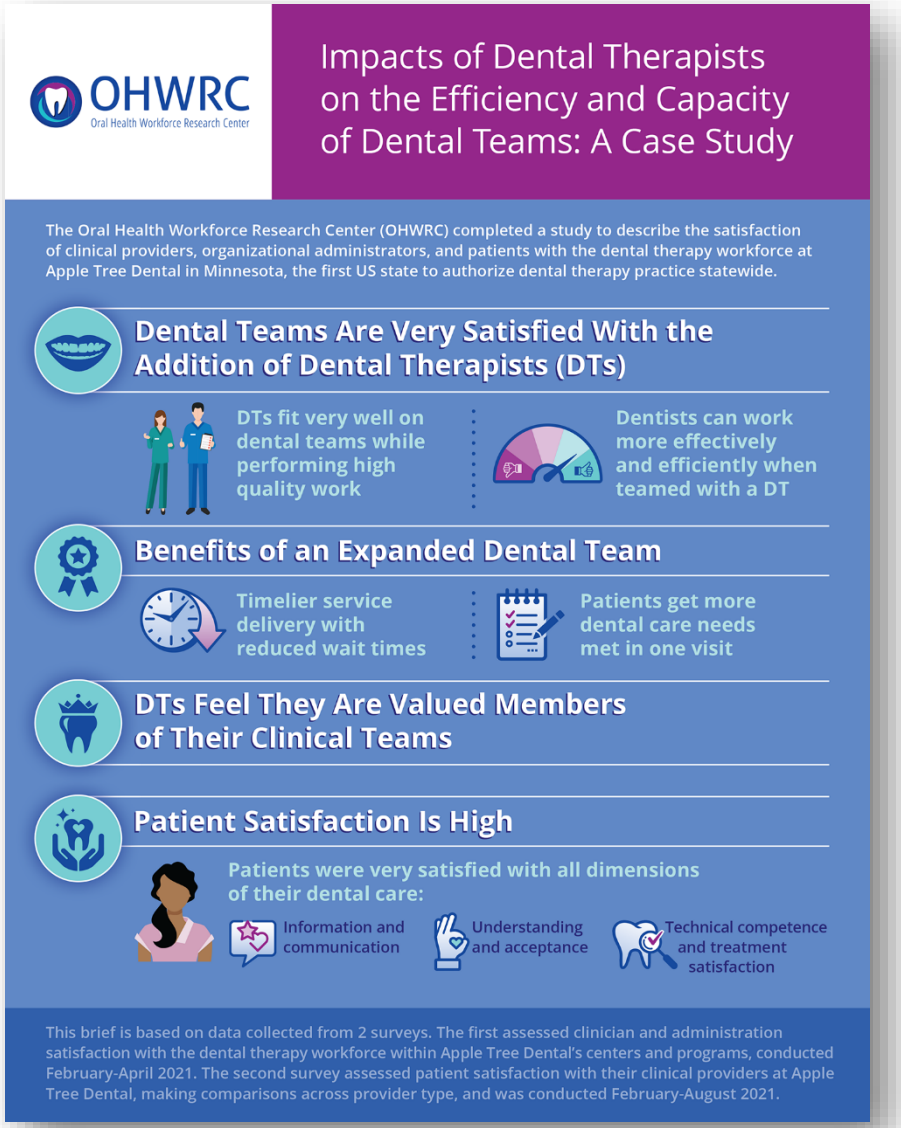
Conclusions and Implications

- Study findings indicated that both the number and complexity of procedures provided by dentists increased in the years *subsequent* to introduction of dental therapists to dental teams, particularly *after they were fully integrated*
- In addition, the number of total patients as well as Medicaid beneficiaries increased with the introduction of dental therapy, *reflecting organizational expansion*
- Our study suggests that introduction of dental therapists to clinical teams enhanced capacity and productivity, enabling to *meet increasing demand from the patient population*

Overall Takeaway

Dental therapists *expanded capacity, increased productivity, improved access, and allowed dentists to focus on more complex care*

Provider and Patient Experiences With Dental Therapists



- Valued members of dental teams
- Reduced wait times and improved access
- High patient satisfaction with care received

Overall Takeaway

Dental therapists were *successfully integrated into dental teams*, contributing to greater access to care, improved efficiency, and enhanced organizational capacity while maintaining high patient satisfaction

Source: Langelier M, Surdu S, O'Malley E. *Provider and Patient Satisfaction With the Dental Therapy Workforce at Apple Tree Dental*. OHWRC, Center for Health Workforce Studies, State University of New York, May 2022.

Zhao Y, Surdu S, Langelier M. Safety Net Patients' Satisfaction with Oral Health Services by Provider Type and Intent to Return for More Care. *J Public Health Dent*. 2024;84(3):289-299. doi: 10.1111/jphd.12629.

Impacts of Dental Therapists on the Efficiency and Capacity of Dental Teams: A Case Study. Infographic, June 2022.

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Questions?

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