

*Practice Notes***Dental students develop program addressing geriatric oral health at local nursing home**

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ABSTRACT

Background: The elderly, especially those who reside in institutions and have a minority or low-income background, often have unmet oral health needs. As life expectancy increases, so will the need for oral health providers skilled in addressing the unique challenges presented by geriatric patients.

Methods: Dentists for Della is a student organization at the Dental College of Georgia that aims to improve the oral health status of residents at the Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home (GWVNH) in Augusta, Georgia. The students conduct fundraising activities so that third and fourth year students can provide needed dental treatment at no cost to the residents. Students also regularly rotate at GWVNH in order to provide tooth brushing help, denture cleanings, and head and neck examinations, including oral cancer screenings.

Results: Dentists for Della has funded approximately \$40,000 worth of dental work since 2013. The program also provides an educational experience valued by students: the ability to interact with patients as early as their first semester of dental school.

Conclusions: Dentists for Della is a vital program which not only provides educational opportunities in institutional public health dentistry and geriatrics for dental students, it also provides a much needed safety net for Georgia veterans with no ability to access other means of dental care.

Key words: Geriatrics; aging; dental education; nursing home; dental care; quality of life; social inequities

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INTRODUCTION

The fastest growing segment of the American population is the elderly (Yellowitz and Schneiderman, 2014). Individuals are not only living longer, but they are keeping their teeth longer as well (Chalmers and Pearson, 2005). Even in cases of edentulism, elderly patients should receive routine oral examinations, since many oral conditions are more prevalent in older age and can have an impact on systemic health. For example, periodontal disease has been linked to systemic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Petersen and Ogawa, 2012). Maintaining good oral health is a key component of maintaining overall health (US & NIDCR, 2000).

Oral health is related to overall quality of life in geriatric patients. Dry mouth, dental decay, loss of teeth, oral pain, altered taste sensation, and many other common conditions can impact a person's ability to eat and enjoy food, resulting in loss of appetite. Mental health and wellbeing can also be affected by poor oral health (Flaer, et al., 2010). Most of these oral conditions can be managed effectively with proper, timely interventions.

The elderly, especially those with a low-income or minority background, experience disparities in access to oral healthcare (OHA, 2016). Impaired communication, restricted

mobility, limited dexterity, or other disabilities and complex medical needs may further limit their ability to seek dental treatment (Gluzman, et al., 2013; Chalmers and Pearson, 2005). As the population continues to age, there is a need for well-trained oral health providers to address the distinctive needs of this growing demographic.

METHODS

The Dentists for Della program operates at Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home (GWVNH). GWVNH, located in Augusta, Georgia, is a 192 bed skilled nursing facility that is only open to residents of Georgia who are veterans (GDVS, 2016). The average age of patients at GWVNH is 84 years (GDVS, 2016). The program is named for Dr. Victor Della-Giustina, a founder of the Dental College of Georgia, formerly the Medical College of Georgia School of Dentistry. Dentists for Della began in 2005, as the Dental College of Georgia wanted to develop curriculum that addressed caring for the elderly. Prior to the current iteration of Dentists for Della, dental students only had one required afternoon rotation at GWVNH, in their third year. In 2013, the program expanded to include the additional rotations seen today.

At least once a month, approximately 30 student volunteers, under faculty supervision, visit GWVNH to provide basic oral hygiene services, such as tooth brushing, limited exams,

denture cleaning, and oral examinations. Additionally, as a result of the success of the Dentists for Della program, rotations at GWVNH have been added to the first, third, and fourth year curriculum. The rotation during the first year takes place during the Community Oral Health Promotion course and serves to introduce dental students to public health, geriatrics, and patient care. The rotations during the third and fourth years involve providing needed treatment for the residents. All treatment provided on these rotations is paid for via fundraising by Dentists for Della.

RESULTS

Since the inception of the student rotations, Dentists for Della has provided approximately \$40,000 worth of needed dental work for residents at GWVNH. Procedures include yearly examinations, dental prophylaxis or cleanings, denture adjustments and repairs, and restorative dentistry such as fillings. Not only has Dentists for Della provided the residents at GWVNH with oral health care, improving their quality of life, the program has also impacted many students personally and professionally by providing meaningful exposure to public health dentistry and geriatric oral health.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Dentists for Della is a program that not only provides additional training for dental students in geriatrics and addressing medically complex patients, it also fills an important gap in healthcare for the residents of Georgia War Veterans Nursing Home by providing an oral health safety net. Additionally, the program introduces students to the different roles a dentist can play in the community as well as increases student awareness of public health.

Implications for public health

As the population ages, the demand for oral health care providers who are competent and willing to address the needs of the elderly will increase. Programs and interventions that

not only address the needs of the aging population but also train oral health providers to provide competent and compassionate care for the nation's elderly should be prioritized.

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