ALUMNI PROFILE:
Three Alumnae Find a Path to Public Health in Rhode Island Clinic

In Pawtucket, R.I., approximately 10 minutes north of Providence, there are three Penn Dental Medicine alumnae pursuing a passion for public health within the same dental care clinic. Situated in a federally designated health-professional shortage area, Drs. Christine Bender (D’08), Lalita Bhattacharya (D’84), and Gloria Hwang-Forzano (D’09) are serving a community in need as key members of Blackstone Valley Community Health Care’s dental care team.

Blackstone Valley Community Health Care is a federally qualified health center, serving Pawtucket, Central Falls, and the surrounding communities. Patients in its dental facility are referred from Blackstone’s two medical offices, which serve approximately 10,000 area residents. A freestanding dental office in downtown Pawtucket, the clinic has 11 operatories, five full-time general dentists, and one part-time oral surgeon.

“We have a modern, well-equipped clinic and are able to provide high-quality care to a community in great need,” says Dr. Bender, adding that the clinic was brand new when she started in 2008 and fully outfitted with digital technology for patient records and radiographs. Dr. Bender came to Blackstone after graduation to fulfill a three-year commitment in “payback” for a three-year National Health Service Corps (NHSC) scholarship she received while at Penn Dental Medicine, and she has decided to stay. In December 2011, Dr. Bender was named Director of Clinical Dentistry with Blackstone, transitioning into the role that since 2007 has been held by another Penn Dental Medicine graduate, Dr. Bhattacharya, who is now Director of Dental Education and Programming.

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—Dr. Hwang-Forzano (D’09)

"After 23 years of private practice in Providence, I came here in 2007 to help expand their dental services as they set up the new Pawtucket clinic,” says Dr. Bhattacharya. "There is a tremendous need for basic dental care and oral health education in the community we serve.” In addition to clinical care and program responsibilities at Blackstone, Dr. Bhattacharya is an Adjunct Professor at Boston University (BU), overseeing the instruction of BU dental students who complete clinical externships at Blackstone. Having been involved in selecting both Drs. Bender and Hwang-Forzano to join Blackstone, she notes with a smile “I may be a bit biased to Penn Dental Medicine.”

Dr. Hwang-Forzano started at Blackstone in May 2011 after completing a general practice residency in Brooklyn, applying to Blackstone to fulfill her two-year NHSC scholarship commitment. She attributes the strong foundation in community oral health she received while at Penn Dental Medicine, and in particular, the guidance of Dr. Joan Gluch, Director of Community Oral Health, in her decision to pursue a NHSC scholarship and her interest in public health.

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care like we are doing here,” says Dr. Hwang-Forzano, adding that “people can be in public health but also do private dentistry — there are ways to do both,” citing as an example the state of Rhode Island’s Mission of Mercy program in which dentists from all specialties volunteer to provide two days of free dental care. “We can encourage our colleagues in private practice to participate in these types of programs,” adds Dr. Hwang-Forzano. She and Dr. Bender are serving on the planning committee for the Rhode Island Mission of Mercy event.

Looking beyond her NHSC scholarship commitment, Dr. Hwang-Forzano isn’t sure yet whether she will continue in public health full-time as Dr. Bender is doing now, or follow a path that combines private practice with public health work.

Dr. Bhattacharya says, “I started my professional life with a solo practice, but think I am going to end my professional life in community health.” And Dr. Bender is looking forward to continuing to build Blackstone’s service in the community with ongoing quality care and the development of new programs (like the mobile sealant program recently initiated within the local school district), and she encourages other dental students to consider a career path in public health dentistry.

“I am very happy; my work here at Blackstone is very rewarding,” says Dr. Bender. “I think more dental students should think about public health as a career option.”