A CALL TO SERVE

AT SEVEN DIFFERENT PROGRAMS AROUND THE CITY, PENN DENTAL MEDICINE STUDENTS ARE VOLUNTEERING TO IMPROVE THE ORAL HEALTH OF UNDERSERVED RESIDENTS

BY JULIANA DELANY

It is Wednesday evening, and while most of her peers are in the library or having dinner, third-year dental student Anna Yuan (D’11) is at St. Agatha/St. James Church at 38th and Chestnut. She is not here for herself, however; she is making sure the neighborhood’s homeless, who have come in for a free meal, have new toothbrushes, plenty of toothpaste and dental floss, information on dental hygiene, dental care referrals, and even oral cancer screenings. For the past three years, Anna has co-coordinated the dental aspect of this multi-disciplinary medical, dental, and legal assistance program, sponsored by the University City Hospital Coalition (UCHC).

The UCHC community program at St. Agatha/St. James Church, which aids approximately 100 individuals each Wednesday evening, is one of several throughout the city that provide free oral health assistance — as well as medical and legal advice — to anyone who needs it, no questions asked. At each of these sites, a community coordinator helps organize the students’ efforts and a physician oversees and triages the patients. Although the dental students are not authorized to provide dental care at the sites, they can offer oral health education and advice, and can refer patients in need to Penn Dental Medicine’s clinics and other clinics throughout the city, which offer free and reduced-rate dental exams and treatment to residents in need.

Giving back and getting back: All Penn Dental Medicine students have community health requirements to meet for graduation. They all take required courses in community health and help staff the School’s PennSmiles program and dental van, which travels to neighborhood schools to examine students’ teeth, provide preventive and comprehensive dental care, and oral health education. Students also provide dental care at the Elwyn Institute with medically complex and disabled individuals. Many also participate in the Bridging the Gap elective summer internship program, which offers placements in community health throughout the city; Anna’s work at St. Agatha/St. James is different because it is part of the enrichment community activities offered at Penn Dental Medicine. Anna and other students earn honors in the Community Health classes when they participate at additional community sites both locally and globally.

Why, when the dental curriculum is so challenging and time-consuming already, do students choose to take time and work with community agencies? For Anna, it is because she receives as much as she gives.

“My work at UCHC has reinforced in me the notion not to prejudge people...there may be times in any person’s life where they may be in need, no matter what their walk of life.”

— SOLOMON SUND, D’11

"The positive experience I’ve had with UCHC has changed my perspective on the importance of underserved populations,” says Anna. “It’s opened my eyes to the plight of the underprivileged in West Philadelphia, and it’s strengthened my belief that access to dental care is a human right — one that should be advocated by everyone in the dental profession.” Anna’s co-coordinator, Solomon Sund (D’11) views the volunteer experience as a way to get out of his comfort zone on campus and experience real people and real situations.

“Being exposed to a different population that has little to no
access to a dental provider really grounds a person to the importance of oral health,” he explains. “There are many people in West Philadelphia who cannot afford a toothbrush or dental floss, or don’t know where to go for a serious dental infection.”

Dr. Joan Gluch, Director of Community Health and Associate Dean for Academic Policies, who oversees the community health program, agrees that the benefits of choosing to participate in these programs are numerous. “This is truly an enrichment activity,” she says. “Students choose it because they want to enrich their dental experience, and they do. They are learning about community and how community health care works, and at the same time they are able to choose a specific area of interest and expand on it.” For example, someone with an interest in pediatric dentistry can volunteer at the Children’s Hospital program. But the rewards don’t stop there, Dr. Gluch says. Students at Penn Dental Medicine have the chance to build a network of talented, like-minded students from Penn’s dental, nursing, medical and law schools who are interested in rolling up their sleeves and making a difference.

In keeping with the Penn Compact: Although most other universities have similar programs, Dr. Gluch feels that Penn’s program is particularly well-suited to the University’s mission and long-term goals. “The University’s Penn Compact, one principle of which is engaging locally, demonstrates our strong, enduring commitment to our neighbors in West Philadelphia,” she says. “Our futures are intertwined, and our responsibility is to help improve the quality of life in these neighborhoods with our special skills and interest.”

While the enrichment community health programs are not for everyone, they are an excellent training ground for those students answering a call to service. “For students who have an interest in solving societal problems, this experience offers an invaluable tool kit for getting involved in the community,” Dr. Gluch says, “and the skills are transferable to any city where our students might choose to live. We are teaching them to reach out to schools, community centers, churches, synagogues and mosques to find out how to make connections and improve health.”

Any dentist can contribute to his or her community, she says, and that contribution doesn’t have to be huge. There are many ways for dentists to get involved, whether they participate in one school visit a year, a monthly church program or a weekly community clinic.

Dr. Gluch hopes that by passing on this skill set, the reach and influence of the community health program will extend beyond Penn Dental Medicine and Philadelphia. “We’re looking at what we can do locally in Philadelphia, but we are also looking at the bigger picture,” she says. “We’d love to hear from our alumni about how they are making a difference in their communities as well.”

Through these seven community health programs, students at the School of Dental Medicine are making a difference for the city’s underserved residents, and for their own futures.

**Homeless Health Initiative, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP)**
Students with an interest in pediatric dentistry join pediatric medical and dental residents from CHOP to visit four shelters each month in West and Southwest Philadelphia.

**United Community Clinic, First African Presbyterian Church**
Faculty and students provide oral health education, screening and referrals on Monday evenings at least once per month at this interdisciplinary health care clinic on West Girard Avenue in Philadelphia.

**University City Hospitality Coalition, St. Agatha / St. James Church**
Dental students have an opportunity to provide education, referrals and free dental supplies to homeless residents who gather for meals at St. Agatha/St. James Church on Wednesday evenings at least twice each month.

**Chinatown Clinic**
In the heart of Chinatown, dental students join medical and law students to assess the needs of homeless residents, providing advice, screenings and referrals as needed.

**Puentes De Salud**
Faculty and students from the Hispanic Dental Association educate and screen the local Latino population and provide referrals to Penn Dental Medicine’s clinics on Thursday evenings twice a month at this neighborhood clinic at 18th and South Streets.

**Geriatric Oral Health Community Programs**
Partnering with the Philadelphia Corporation on Aging and the Philadelphia Housing Authority, the geriatric outreach programs provide educational and screening activities to older adults throughout inner-city Philadelphia, targeting individuals in community senior centers and low-income public housing.

**Oral Health Outreach Program with HIV/AIDS Clients**
This community-based program, funded by the City of Philadelphia Aids Activities Coordinating Office (AACO), provides oral health education and dental referral with HIV/AIDS clients in conjunction with the School’s Oral Medicine Clinic.