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— DR. JOAN GLUCH

PENNSMILES

A DECADE OF DENTISTRY ON THE ROAD

The PennSmiles mobile dental clinic celebrates 10 years of bringing personalized, preventive dental care and treatment to the school children of West and Southwest Philadelphia.

OPPOSITE: Dr. Joan Gluch (center), Interim Chief of the Division of Community Oral Health and Director of Community Oral Health; students Kruti Patel (D'14) and Fred Chen (D'14); and Debra Linkstrom, RDH, PennSmiles Clinic Manager.

IN 2000, the Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health brought national attention to a critical issue: many American children lacked access to primary dental care. In fact, the Surgeon General reported that tooth decay was the nation's leading pediatric health problem, more prevalent than asthma and allergies.

Lack of access to oral health care in disadvantaged communities had long been on Penn Dental Medicine's radar. Since 1994, the School had been sending faculty and students into West Philadelphia's schools to provide educational programs and dental examinations, and referring children for follow-up care in Penn Dental Medicine's pediatric dental clinic. However, the Surgeon General's report, combined with the University's ongoing desire to expand its partnership with the surrounding West Philadelphia community and school district budget cuts that greatly reduced its existing oral hygiene programs, led to a School-wide call to action.

"The future of West Philadelphia and the future of Penn have always been intertwined," says Dr. Joan Gluch, Interim Chief of the Division of Community Oral Health and Director of Community Oral Health,

describing the University-wide commitment to community engagement that is part of President Amy Gutmann's vision for Penn through the 'Penn Compact.' "We know that by working in partnership with community members to solve health problems, we strengthen both Penn and its surrounding neighborhoods."

GOING MOBILE

Problems specific to low-income communities often make obtaining dental care difficult, says Dr. Gluch. These barriers include lack of transportation to the dental office, conflicting parental work schedules, and lack of dental insurance or income to pay for care. To truly help solve these problems, it became obvious that Penn Dental Medicine needed to go mobile.

"The public schools were asking, 'Can you bring dental treatment here?' We asked ourselves, 'How can we do this? How can we bring essential services to the schools?'" remembers Dr. Gluch. Under the leadership of Dean Raymond Fonseca (Dean 1989–2003) and the Assistant Dean of Community Service at the time, Dr. Herman Segal, a plan began to take shape.

The result of their collaboration was PennSmiles, a mobile dentistry program designed to deliver dental services directly to local schools so that children without transportation would receive proper oral care. In turn, the program would provide valuable training and experience in pediatric dentistry for Penn Dental Medicine students. In 2001, Penn Dental Medicine received funding from

42 participating schools over 10 years

the Health Resources and Services Administration, and later, the Pennsylvania Health Department for the program. In 2003, the colorful PennSmiles mobile clinic, a 40-foot custom coach fully equipped with two dental chairs and equipment for comprehensive dental care, was ready for action.

PennSmiles has spent the past decade strengthening the University-community connection. With its bright red cab and vibrant photographs, the mobile clinic is a warm and welcome presence on the streets, and school yards of West and Southwest Philadelphia. “It’s a great reflection on Penn Dental Medicine,” says Dr. Gluch. “When residents see the PennSmiles bus, they see a tangible commitment from Penn Dental Medicine to improve the oral health of children in our community.”

IT STARTED AT THE LEA SCHOOL

The Henry C. Lea Elementary School at 4700 Locust Street became the first school to receive a visit from PennSmiles in its inaugural year. In fact, for its first nine years, the exterior of the bus displayed photographs of the smiling faces of Lea students (the bus was refurbished in 2012 and the exterior now depicts the faces of Penn Dental Medicine students, staff, faculty, and children and grandchildren of Penn staff members). The PennSmiles program has been brightening the smiles of Lea students ever since the first visit, says Kathy Wetzel, NP, the school nurse then and now.

“The first time I saw the van, my jaw dropped open,” she remembers. “I was flabbergasted. I had never seen a dental office on wheels before.” Students and their parents quickly embraced the preventive care and dental treatment offered by PennSmiles (“The students love it!”), and today it plays an invaluable role in school health. Wetzel estimates that approximately 20 percent of her students will rely on PennSmiles this year for primary preventive care, cleanings, and/or treatment.

“It has had a huge impact on our children’s dental health,” she says, adding that it’s now rare for a child to come to her with a serious dental problem. “If a child comes to me about a tooth, it’s usually a loose tooth. We really don’t have to worry about severe dental problems anymore.” As for the Penn Dental Medicine students who have worked at the school over the years, they couldn’t be kinder, Wetzel says: “They are caring and nurturing and very concerned about our students.”

1,500 dental students have worked on the bus

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In 2008, demand from local schools for the PennSmiles mobile clinic was high, and it was operating at maximum capacity when Penn Dental Medicine acquired two portable dental units, which are used to provide preventive dental care (sealants). The addition of a mini-van in 2010 allowed the storage and transport of the portable equipment for expansion of the preventive dental care program, which has greatly increased the number of children who are treated.

A COMMITMENT TO SERVICE

Through its extensive community outreach program, Penn Dental Medicine requires each student to participate in community oral health activities as part of a four-year sequence of academically based service learning courses for a minimum of 82 hours of service activities before graduation. The service requirement can be met in many ways – by completing dental services at community-based clinics, through interdisciplinary health care programs throughout the city, and a variety of other outreach programs. With the advent of PennSmiles, visits to local schools became a critical piece of the community service requirement, with every third- and fourth-year student scheduled to work on the PennSmiles bus.

“We’re proud that our program now offers each of our students substantial experience in community oral health education, preventive dental services, and comprehensive dental care provided on both mobile and portable dental equipment,” says Dr. Gluch. “It’s an invaluable asset to a well-rounded dental education.”



65,000

miles travelled by
PennSmiles bus

Third- and fourth-year dental students provide care to children aboard the van under faculty supervision. On one school visit, they see up to 12 patients.

A DAY ON THE ROAD

Weeks before PennSmiles ever reaches a school destination, careful behind-the-scenes coordination between Debra Linkstrom, Penn Dental Medicine's public health dental hygienist, and the school's nurse or principal has already occurred. Each child who will be seen in the bus or participate in preventive programs provided in-school has submitted a signed parental permission slip and has been scheduled for dental care. Depending on the size of the school, it may take days or even weeks at the same location before all of the scheduled children can be seen.

At 8 a.m. on the morning of a scheduled school visit, the PennSmiles bus, driven by a contracted driver from Philadelphia Trolley Works, which houses and maintains the bus, arrives at Penn Dental Medicine and is met by the hygienist and the dental students scheduled to work that day. Together, they prepare the mobile clinic for the day, sterilizing dental instruments and stocking supplies. With dental students safely seated inside—the vehicle is equipped with seat belts, says Dr. Gluch—it proceeds to the scheduled elementary school, one of 26 that PennSmiles will service this year. At the school, the

PennSmiles bus is met by a Penn Dental Medicine faculty dentist, who provides clinical supervision for primary dental care provided to the children. "The Penn faculty dentists are committed, experienced clinical teachers who enjoy their work providing dental care in the community," says Dr. Gluch.

During the course of the day, the students and faculty provide care to up to 12 patients on the PennSmiles bus, while inside the school, in an auditorium, cafeteria, or empty classroom, students and public health dental hygienists provide preventive dental care and classroom education. Together, the team covers all aspects of basic diagnostic, preventive, and restorative dentistry. Children with complex needs, including those requiring surgical or orthodontic care, are scheduled for appointments at Penn Dental Medicine or other community clinics.

A FUTURE OF BRIGHT SMILES

Over the past 10 years, as more and more children have received preventive education and treatment from PennSmiles the impact has been evident. "While we continue to find a great need among Philadelphia school children for both preventive and restorative dental care, especially as new school children join our program and seek dental care on the

PennSmiles bus, over time, we have seen the need for restorative care in many children decrease," says Dr. Gluch. "However, since we added the portable dental units for preventive care, we are able to accommodate more children and provide a greater number of restorative dental services on the PennSmiles bus."

Looking back proudly on the history of PennSmiles, Dr. Gluch also reflects on its future. "For the first five years, we were concerned with establishing contacts with principals, school nurses, and families in order to develop a strong program," she says. "The second five were spent strengthening and expanding the program, especially in the preventive services we provide. In the next five years, we will be documenting and analyzing the performance of our program in order to find ways to be more effective and treat more children. We look forward to continuing to work with our neighbors in West and Southwest Philadelphia to increase access to dental care for school children and reduce dental decay." ■

—By Juliana Delany