

HOPE RESTORE CARE  
RESTORE HOPE INSPIRE  
SMILES RESTORE CONNECT  
SEEKERS OF ASYLUM SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA  
SURVIVORS OF TORTURE



SEEKERS OF ASYLUM SMILES HOPE  
INSPIRE CARE RECONNECT  
NATIONALITIES SERVICE CENTER PARTNERSHIP  
SURVIVORS OF TORTURE

# RESTORING SMILES, BUILDING HOPE

## NEW COMMUNITY OUTREACH SERVING REFUGEES WHO SURVIVED TORTURE, OTHER TRAUMA

IN A PRIVATE SPACE IN PENN DENTAL Medicine's Henry Schein Cares Clinic in honor of Edward & Shirley Shils, a pair of fourth-year dental students lean in toward a reclining patient, clad in jeans and white high-tops. Positioned to the side of the dental chair, a rolling monitor projects a friendly faced, live translator, ensuring the patient and practitioners understand one another clearly as they discuss the patient's oral exam and treatment needs. The students check in periodically with Dr. Olivia Sheridan, who is overseeing the clinic, before moving on to the next stages of the appointment.

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OPPOSITE: Some of the 20 fourth-year students selected to provide care to refugees referred to Penn Dental Medicine. Serving individuals who have survived torture and other trauma, the students have volunteered to give their time to the clinic for the full academic year. Leading the clinic is Dr. Olivia Sheridan (center), supported by Clinic Coordinator Joanna Jimenez (behind Dr. Sheridan).

RIGHT: Clients of Nationalities Service Center (NSC), a refugee services organization, are referred to the School for dental care. As part of a wellness program at NSC, clients painted stones.

In many ways, the procedures and care are precisely the same here as they are for every patient occupying a dental chair in the School's clinics. But the visiting patient population is different. Here, students and clinicians are dedicated to treating people who have come to the United States seeking asylum, specifically those who have survived torture and other trauma in other countries. At Penn Dental Medicine, they're receiving comprehensive care without paying out of pocket.

"This clinic epitomizes one of our goals as a school: To find the most vulnerable people in Philadelphia and to help them," says Dr. Mark Wolff, the Morton Amsterdam Dean of Penn Dental Medicine. "And for our students, working with these patients gives them a personal satisfaction that is incredible, beyond anything that can be described."

As part of the survivors of torture clinic, the School has partnered with Nationalities Service Center (NSC), an organization that helps connect immigrants and refugees with a variety of support, including legal and medical assistance. NSC, working closely with Penn Dental Medicine, refers select clients to



receive treatment at the School. In addition to survivors of torture, NSC is referring those who have undergone other types of trauma, including human trafficking, violent conflict, or persecution.

"Our clients have a lot of dental needs," says Ariel MacNeill, manager for health access and specialized support at NSC. "Many may not have had dental care before, especially preventative care. This clinic is meeting a huge need for us."



## BUILDING ON A STRENGTH

This special outreach offering was a direct product of Dean Wolff's desire to augment the School's community engagement initiatives. Since arriving at Penn last year, he has overseen expansions in the capacity at a number of the school's community-based clinics. The program also mirrors a similar one he implemented at New York University (NYU), where he served on the faculty before coming to Penn.

At NYU, he had heard from a physician about the pressing oral care needs for survivors of torture, and worked with others to quickly put together a program to serve them.



"These were people who had been tortured by having a bright light shined in their eye, or with sounds, with pain, some were tortured orally by inflicting damage and injury to their teeth," he says. "It required us to do our very best as dentists at understanding and coping with the individual's needs."

At Penn, he already knew the students, faculty, and staff were highly experienced at meeting these needs with sensitivity in a variety of populations, including pediatric, elderly, and disabled patients. "And we've been highly successful," says Dean Wolff. To extend that outreach, he turned to Dr. Joan Gluch, Chief of the Division of Community Oral Health at Penn Dental Medicine, to identify an organization the School could partner with to reach survivors of torture. Dr. Gluch pointed him to NSC.

## ASSEMBLING THE TEAM

This past spring, Dean Wolff took that information straight to the office of Dr. Olivia Sheridan, Professor of Clinical Restorative Dentistry.

"Olivia is truly incredible," Dean Wolff says. "She manages to do things for our patients that I think are very, very important and she transmits that to our students."

Dr. Sheridan took on the project with full force. With support from Dr. Najeed Saleh, Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs, she claimed a space within the Henry Schein Clinic that is somewhat secluded, and put

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- DR. OLIVIA SHERIDAN

processes in place to ease the paperwork and check-in process for patients.

"We set up everything internally so we have our own clinic coordinator, Joanna Jimenez, who interfaces with NSC," says Dr. Saleh. "We typically receive their medical histories in advance from the primary care providers of these patients through NSC. And because we are covering costs that aren't otherwise handled by insurance, they can bypass the patient financial services area as well."

Beyond coordinating those logistics, one of the most significant tasks associated with the launching of the clinic for survivors of torture involved reaching out to students to participate in it. After sharing the opportunity with fourth-year dental students, Dr. Sheridan screened applications and selected 20 to take part.

"I was looking for students who had any experience working with special populations, either in dental school or before," she says, "students with international experience, and definitely students with very high social sensitivity and social skills, who could also work independently."

Among those chosen was Amy Malakoff (D'20), whose background as an undergraduate psychology major sets her apart from many other dental students. "The administrators of the program said they were looking for people who demonstrate excellent interpersonal skills and resilience," Malakoff says. "Those are areas I like to focus on growing as a clinician, treating a patient not just from a biological perspective but from a psychosocial one."

Goldie Razban (D'20), another student selected to participate, felt similarly about her desire to hone the emotional intelligence required to serve a vulnerable population. "Since members of this population are still healing from physical and psychological wounds," she notes, "it's a matter of allowing yourself to step back from just doing the dentistry — the handwork of it — and taking the time to understand the patient fully and have them be comfortable in your chair before you even start treatment."

Razban had garnered previous experience with refugees and asylum seekers as part of Penn's Bridging the Gaps program, which connects students in the health fields with underserved populations in need of health services. During her first two years in dental school, Razban had worked with organizations, including NSC, helping recent immigrants gain access to welfare services and other benefits.

"When I first heard about the clinic here, I was immediately blown away because, through my previous experiences, we were trying to include dental services for refugees," Razban says.

## A DEFT APPROACH

Beginning in May, the students on board, Dr. Sheridan organized several workshops to get everyone up to speed on some of the issues they would need to be prepared to encounter.

“We did a whole series on immigration policy in the U.S.,” says Dr. Sheridan. “We had one evening that we spent discussing some of the things that they have experienced that might be triggers in a clinical setting. We had another session on the physical manifestations of torture, and common maladies associated with both refugee camps and with torture.”

Such conditions could arise from physical torture; for example, being hit in the face or mouth, causing injuries to joints, lost teeth, or soft tissue injuries. Students were also taught about post-traumatic stress disorder,



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and given strategies for approaching care that could help patients avoid possible triggers.

Student Irada Rahman (D’20), an immigrant herself, was drawn by the opportunity to help people through a difficult time of their lives.

“It’s been eye-opening,” she says. “Everyone who goes through an experience like this experiences it differently. We were taught to put ourselves in their shoes and learn their story, know what things to ask for, or if they’re not comfortable sharing, not to push for things.”

Rahman has also been grateful for the financial support of the school that has taken away any barriers to treatment. “We’re free to provide the best treatment we can give,” she says. “Knowing the position that these patients are in, that freedom makes me so happy.”

## ‘GREAT INVESTMENT’

The clinic launched smoothly in July. It runs one afternoon each week, and the students, split into pairs, operate as a team, trading off practitioner and assistant duties. They’re committed to give their time to the clinic for the full year, and their involvement is all volunteer-based, over and above their other clinical and community requirements.

“We keep adding to the list of things that did work and that didn’t work,” says Dr. Sheridan, who leads them in a recap discussion after each session. “We want to keep learning so we can improve each week.” When asked what drew her to the project, Dr. Sheridan doesn’t miss a beat. “Patient care,” she says.

From feedback thus far, the clinic is exceeding expectations in that regard.

“I’ve heard a lot of really positive feedback from clients and from our liaison who visits the clinic,” says MacNeill.

“They’re being able to communicate well with the students who are working with them, they’re happy with the quality of care, and the fact that they don’t have to pay huge sums to get it is huge. If they show up with dental pain, they’re not just getting a prescription for pain meds, they’re actually getting the work done that they need.”

In response to clients who have asked if their children can be seen, Dr. Sheridan and the students will be providing pediatric care in the clinic as well, with backup from the School’s Division of Pediatric Dentistry.

“We’re getting a lot of support from specialty programs around the School,” she says. “They’re stepping up to give that specialized work that’s needed.”

Though the initiative is being framed as a pilot program, Dean Wolff, Dr. Sheridan, Dr. Saleh, or NSC don’t have an end date in place.

“We look at this as a great investment,” says Dean Wolff. “We are teaching our dental students through experiential learning. Our commitment is to treat these people and bring them back a sense of joy in life and dignity in their smiles.”

– By Katie Unger-Baillie