

FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

VIEWS ON DENTAL TOPICS & TRENDS



*Contributed by Dr. Miriam Robbins, Director,
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— DR. MIRIAM ROBBINS

Disabilities, a 12-chair facility designed to accommodate patients with a variety of medical, physical, psychological, and cognitive conditions (see story, page 12). According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, 16% of all Philadelphians — roughly 246,000 people — had a physical, emotional, or cognitive disability, making it the city with the largest disabled population among America’s 10 largest cities.

This facility will provide a unique educational experience for dental students, and eventually residents, that focuses on non-general anesthesia delivery of dental treatment; individualized caries risk assessment and minimally invasive caries treatment plans; implementation of personalized oral health care and prevention plans, including diet modifications; and hands-on education for caregivers in the delivery of oral hygiene. Third- and fourth-year dental students will work in pairs to provide comprehensive dental treatment to patients with a variety of medical complexities and/or disabilities. Emphasis will be on teaching the students how to comprehensively evaluate a patient with special health care needs from both a bottom-up view that analyzes the underlying

Preparing Students to Deliver Care to Person with Disabilities

Oral health continues to be an important health issue for the nearly 61 million adults in the United States living with a disability due to difficulty in accessing dental care. This is especially true for patients with developmental or intellectual disabilities. One of the greatest barriers continues to be finding oral health care practitioners with the skills, experience, or capacity to care for people with disabilities.

Until recently, there was no clear mandate to provide hands-on training to dental and dental hygiene students in the treatment of patients with disabilities beyond assessing the treatment needs, which frequently meant referring the patient to a hospital clinic. This changed in 2020, when the Commission on Dental Accreditation made a small but critical change to Standard 2-25 of the Accreditation Standards for Dental Education Programs, which relates to patients with special health

care needs. New language was added stating that graduates of predoctoral dental programs must be competent not only in **assessing** the treatment needs of patients with special health care needs, but also in **providing** treatment as well. This has opened the door to seek ways to ensure that all graduates have meaningful experiences in dental school in treating patients with conditions that may require modifications in the delivery of routine dental care. I am honored to be part of a new initiative here at Penn Dental Medicine aimed at training our dental students to become competent in the delivery of high quality oral health care to this underserved population.

There will certainly not be a lack of patients in need of care for students at Penn Dental Medicine to treat in the new, state-of-the-art Personalized Care Center of the School’s Care Center for Persons with

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medical conditions, disability, and/or limitations in daily activity as well as a top-down approach, addressing how to modify the environment and the delivery of the dental care to accommodate the patient's specific needs.

The importance of reviewing the patient's chart before the appointment, discussing with the faculty any specific modifications or enhanced patient behavior management skills that might be needed to optimally deliver care, and learning how to work efficiently as a coordinated team will be an important part of the educational experience. In addition to the dental faculty, there will be a dedicated nurse practitioner available to work closely with the students to review medical histories and obtain any further medical information needed prior to providing dental care. Plus, a patient navigator will ensure that the necessary consent forms have been properly filled out and signed prior to the appointment, assist the patient and their caregivers in scheduling a return appointment, and help to arrange transportation to and from the appointment if needed.

We are working diligently to build a compassionate dental workforce committed to providing competent care for persons with disabilities by ensuring that our students have the skills to care for this vulnerable population. The better we can expose future dentists and dental hygienists to providing care for these patients during their education, the more likely they will be to treat them in their practices. With the right knowledge, skills, and attitude, this next generation of practitioners can make a difference for those with inequitable access to quality care.