

Giving Back to the Community: A Student's Perspective

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During our journey through dental school, it can be quite easy for students to narrowly focus on academics and clinical requirements. We sometimes forget about one of the truest responsibilities of dentistry as a profession — community health. At the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, the nature of the Main Clinic is to provide students with an opportunity to give back to the community. In addition, the University of Western Ontario Dental Students' Society (UWODSS) helps to organize a number of programs each year that remind students of this duty.

The Main Clinic provides dental services at a significantly reduced rate to patients in the London area, which introduces students to the concept of providing services to populations in need. The clinic, which has approximately 24,000 patient visits each year, recently underwent a complete renovation of the student operatories — the first renovation since the school opened its doors to the public in the late 1960s. Both students and patients now enjoy a modern and ergonomic clinical environment, which is particularly appreciated by those who endured the outdated cubicles before the renovation.

The Value of Endowment Funds

Recognizing that updated facilities help create a better student education and patient experience, a subcommittee of the UWODSS council is developing a student endowment fund program we hope will be implemented in the 2009–2010 academic year. The basis of this initiative will be established by annual voluntary student contributions. Students will be represented on the fund committee and will be able to provide input on how to improve the student and patient dental experience. The student endowment fund will be a vital piece of the existing Endowment to Enhance Clinical Dentistry program, which was created as a second step to the successful Main Clinic renovation campaign. The focus of the Endowment to Enhance Clinical Dentistry is to improve the quality of education at Schulich Dentistry by assisting in the recruitment and retention of full- and part-time faculty. Schulich Dentistry already has a respectable student-to-faculty ratio, which is essential for providing enhanced dental services to the London community.

Another fund developed specifically for our patients is the Dental Care Fund. This program provides access to dental care and treatment to individuals with special financial needs. With the help of faculty and staff, students organize events throughout the year, with the proceeds going to the Dental Care Fund. These fundraising events include the annual Mouthguard Clinic, which sees students fabricate mouthguards at a reduced cost for local sports enthusiasts, as well as the Chili Cook-Off and International Food Day events, where students, faculty and staff share their favourite recipes. In addition to raising money for a great cause, these programs highlight the warm relationships students share with the faculty and staff at Schulich Dentistry.



Nicholas Massé, Dr. Harinder Sandhu, director, Schulich Dentistry, Dr. Carol Herbert, dean, Schulich Medicine & Dentistry, and Dr. Munir El Kassem, assistant director of clinic affairs, Schulich Dentistry, at the opening ceremony of the Main Clinic.

Photo: John Selinger



Dental students Zeeshan Hemraj and Sami Jamaily were part of the MedOutreach program in Arusha, Tanzania, earlier this year.

Outreach to the Community

Many UWODSS events and programs are organized with the goal of educating the community about oral health. Our Tooth Talk program began in 2007 with guidance from the Middlesex-London Public Health Unit in Ontario. Its aim is to engage, entertain and educate elementary school students about dental health and prevention through targeted age-specific productions by a dedicated group of dental students. The children's enthusiasm and the tremendous feedback

from teachers suggest that this program will be an important community outreach program for UWODSS for years to come

Schulich Dentistry also collaborates with students from Schulich Medicine to organize events such as the Holiday Hamper program, where students donate unwrapped gifts to benefit families in need through the Children's Aid Society, and the Intergenerational Gala, where 75 medical and dental students pair up with 75 London seniors for an evening of dinner, dancing, games and pleasant conversation. Students enjoy this interaction and have learned that lending a friendly ear can sometimes be the best medicine of all.

One of Western's largest outreach programs is a collaboration of its dentistry, medicine and nursing programs. MedOutreach sends 4 medical, 2 nursing and 2 dental students to Tanzania, Africa, to promote primary health-care principles and public health. Dental students provide oral hygiene instruction at secondary schools and dental care at the local and hospital dental clinics under the supervision of 2 permanent advisors, Dr. Michael John and Dr. Peter Mhando. The program has been running for over 20 years. The experience participating students gain is invaluable and the opportunity to make a difference in a developing nation has allowed them to see first-hand how oral health education can provide confidence and optimism for a community. Recognizing the value of this experience, a subcommittee of UWODSS has recently

been established to promote student-created dental outreach programs and collaboration with Dentists Without Borders.

Another outreach program closer to home sends a group of fourth-year students to Moose Factory in Northern Ontario to perform and assist with basic dental services for the First Nation population. The program is organized through Schulich Dentistry's pediatric department. Students returning from the mission have commented on how much of an eye-opening experience it is and how privileged they felt to be given the opportunity to affect change in the developing community.

Lastly, an exciting new program initiated by Dr. Ken Wright has quickly won the respect of students and community dentists. The Dental Outreach Community Service (DOCS) program



The Schulich Dentistry Mighty Dents hockey team after defeating the University of Toronto Dentistry team in the second annual ODA Cup event. Proceeds from the game went to the Princess Margaret Hospital and the DOCS program.

serves members of the London community who cannot afford basic dental services. The program is a collaboration between community dentists, dental students, dental hygienists, dental assistants and staff of Schulich Dentistry, who use mobile dental units to set up dental clinics at different sites within London. This year dental students assisted the dentists; however, next year students will perform the procedures under the guidance of dentists as part of an out-of-clinic curriculum assignment. This program exemplifies how a multidisciplinary approach is crucial to creating successful initiatives that benefit a community. Students have shown their support for the program by donating proceeds from this year's second annual ODA Cup hockey game between Schulich and Toronto Dentistry. Even though our team won 4-1, the real winners are the DOCS program and the community it serves.

The newly renovated Main Clinic, the modern Simulation Clinic, and the collegial rapport students have with the dental faculty are all features that attracted past and present dental students to study at Schulich Dentistry. More important, however, is our responsibility as students to participate in, and initiate, programs that give back to the communities that support us and beyond. Not only will this naturally attract new student leaders to our program, but it will engrain the concept of giving back to our communities into future Schulich Dentistry students. ✦

THE AUTHOR



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