Help with Special Needs Dentistry
By Cornelia Read
Fall 2003

For children and adults with developmental disabilities, dental health and oral hygiene can be difficult to maintain. Parents and caregivers are often faced with other medical issues that can take precedence over dental needs, basic care can be challenging, and visits to the dentist’s office traumatic for kids and their families.

Some national programs have begun to address the unique dental needs of the developmentally disabled, most notably the “Special Needs, Special Smiles” program offered in conjunction with Special Olympics events, which offers dental screenings and recommendations for the athletes, and recent proposals made as a result of the Surgeon General’s Conference on Health Disparities and Mental Retardation in December of 2001, which resulted in the formation of the American Academy of Developmental Medicine and Dentistry (AADMD), a group of concerned doctors and dentists who have been meeting for just over a year.

Dr. Philip May, M.D., president of AADMD, was recently quoted as saying, “Our organization serves as a collaboration between medicine and dentistry to work together for the overall good health of patients. You can’t have good overall health without good oral health. We need to use a team approach. We can’t be two separate but parallel groups. We need to create bridges between the two professions to help address the needs of patients with mental retardation or developmental disability.

In the U.S. an estimated 7.5 million people have mental retardation. This new academy’s mission is to enhance the quality and availability of care to these patients by training medical students, dental students, and other students in the health care professions in the fundamentals of caring for this special population group.

Dr. Sanford Fenton, professor and chair of pediatric dentistry and community oral health at the University of Tennessee College of Dentistry, commented, “As AADMD was getting off the ground, the ADA complemented its mission by passing its historic Res. 66H in New Orleans last October.”

Res. 66H directed the ADA to support “appropriate initiatives and legislation to improve and foster the oral health of persons with special needs.” It encourages constituent and component dental societies to support related state and local initiatives and legislation, encouraging dental and allied dental programs to educate students about the oral health needs and issues faced by people with special needs.
Dental patients with special needs may often be more fearful of even routine procedures. Pediatric dentists spend an extra two years in dental school, and are educated to address issues facing special needs patients. Often, a pediatric dentist, sometimes called a pedodontist, can be the best choice for developmentally disabled adults as well as children.

Some children need more support than a gentle, caring manner to feel comfortable during dental treatment. If a child needs restraint, in some cases, care is best administered as “sleep dentistry,” using sedation even for routine procedures such as cleanings and fillings. One local provider, Pediatric Dentistry of Pleasant Hill, has children’s anaesthesiologists from Children’s Hospital, Oakland, come into the office on specific days to help treat special needs patients. Services include nitrous oxide, oral conscious sedation, and in some cases general anaesthesia. The practice’s website says “this is a great advantage when medically compromised or young children need extensive treatment and are unable to cooperate.”

If a child needs extensive treatment, the pediatric dentist may provide care at a local hospital. Pediatric dentists are educated in behavior management, sedation and anesthesia techniques. Your dentist can select a technique based on the specific health needs of your child, then discuss the benefits, limits and risks of that technique with you.

For many in the developmentally disabled community, necessary medications can affect dental health. Some liquid medications contain from 30 to 50 percent sucrose, such as those used for preventing heart disease, seizures, or recurrent infections. These sugar-laden oral medications are most often given before a nap or bed time, when salivary flow is diminished and will not wash away the liquids. It’s better for your child’s teeth to give the doses of medications when he or she is awake, if possible, and to have the child rinse thoroughly after each dose. Be sure to inform your dentist of the medications the child is taking, and the frequency and time of the dosages prescribed. You can also request sugar-free medications from your pharmacist.

For kids who have difficulty holding a toothbrush, there are several ways to adapt them. Fastening the brush to the child’s hand with a wide rubber band, sliding a rubber ball or bicycle grip over the brush’s handle, and running hot water over the handle until it can be bent can all help kids “get a grip.” The brush handle can also be extended, for those with difficulty lifting their arms, by taping it to a ruler or wooden spoon. Using an electric or battery-powered brush can be a great help.

If your child needs help with brushing, different positions can make the going easier. You’ll want to support the child’s head, be able to see inside his or her mouth, and be able to manipulate the brush with ease. A good position is to have the child sit on the floor, as you sit behind them on a chair with his/her head
against your knees. If he or she is uncooperative, you can place your legs over
his or her arms to keep them still. Similarly, you can have your child lie on a bed
or a sofa with his or her head in your lap. Support the head and shoulders with
your arm. If the child is uncooperative, a second person can hold hands and feet,
if needed. For the child who has difficulty sitting up straight, a beanbag chair can
allow them to relax without fear of falling. Use the same positions as for the bed
or the sofa.

If your child is in a wheelchair, you can use your arm to brace his or her head
while standing behind it. A pillow will make this more comfortable for the child.
For small children, you can sit behind the wheelchair, remembering to lock chair
wheels first, then tilt the chair back so that the child’s head rests in your lap.

If you don’t have dental insurance coverage, The University of the Pacific in San
Francisco offers an Advanced General Dentistry Clinic, staffed by resident
dentists who have recently graduated and are pursuing an advanced education
in general dentistry. The clinic provides service to children and adults with a wide
variety of medical, developmental, and psychological disabilities and needs.

Treatment options are developed and treatment provided in a way that considers
the specific abilities and needs of each individual patient. The school's clinics are
wheel chair accessible. Treatment can be provided with using special
medications including sedative medication. Dental treatment can also be
provided in a hospital setting for those individuals with more complex situations.
Hospital dentistry procedures are performed by coordinating the efforts of the
patient’s physician, dental faculty and residents from the school, and social
workers and other personnel at local hospitals.

Specialists are available for consultation and treatment of more complex
problems in other areas: cosmetic dentistry, endodontics (root canals), implants,
orthodontics (braces), oral-maxillofacial surgery (extractions), pediatric dentistry
for children, periodontics (gums) and prosthodontics (crowns, bridges, partials
and dentures).

The UOP School of Dentistry offers comprehensive and quality dental care at
reasonable prices. Fees are up to 40% less than the average private dental office
in the Bay Area, and they accept most dental insurance plans including Denti-
Cal, Medi-Cal and private insurance as well as cash, check, VISA and
Mastercard. Flexible payment options are available for those who are eligible and
may be discussed with one of their financial coordinators.

If you know of another good pediatric dentist or medical provider serving special
needs patients in the area, please let us know. We want to keep you informed on
medical and dental resources for children with special needs in upcoming
newsletters.
Some Local Resources:
Alameda Pediatric Dentistry  
2125 Whitehall Place, Alameda 94501  
Drs. Oliver, Perry, Tran, Lum all can treat children with special needs.

Pediatric Dentistry of Pleasant Hill  
2710 Pleasant Hill Road, Pleasant Hill, CA (925) 947-1188  
Children’s anaesthesiologists from Children’s Hospital, Oakland, come into the office on specific days to help treat special needs patients. Services include nitrous oxide, oral conscious sedation, and in some cases general anaesthesia.

Dr. Lisa Nguyen  
450 Sutter Street Suite 1023  
San Francisco, CA  94108  
Phone (415) 981-9888  
Fax (415) 616-2080

Dr. Allen Wong  
Advanced Education in General Dentistry Program University of the Pacific  
2155 Webster St.  
San Francisco, CA  94115  
(415) 929-6675  
Fax (415) 749-3338

Advanced General Dentistry Clinic (AGD Clinic)  
UOP School of Dentistry  
2155 Webster Street (between Sacramento & Clay Streets)  
Floor Level B  
San Francisco, California 94115  
Telephone (415) 929-6675