

Council on Linkages between Academia and Public Health Practice

2006 Linkages Awards

**University of Illinois at Chicago School of Dentistry
&
The Oak Park and River Forest Infant Welfare Society/Clinic

Dental Student Community Partnership**

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**University of Illinois at Chicago School of Dentistry and the Infant Welfare
Clinic
Dental Student Community Partnership**

The oral health needs of low income children in Illinois are staggering. Over half of Illinois children have cavities. The majority of these children are low income and minority. The Infant Welfare Clinic has provided medical and dental care to children in for 90 years in the Chicago area. In the last 10 years the clinic has seen double digit increases each year in the number of children coming to the clinic for their oral healthcare. This year the clinic expects to provide over 4,000 dental visits to approximately 2,000 children ages 2-19.

As the clinic has expanded it has been difficult to find dental providers who are willing or able to provide dental care to a low income multicultural client base. Lack of access to dental care for low income children is due in part to the lack of dentists who are willing to treat low income patients or participate in public health dentistry. Although many established dentists provide charity care in their practices, they often are reluctant to add public aid patients because of the low reimbursement rate and state payment delays. In addition many dentists have had little experience with minority groups or low income children. They have stereotypes that a dental clinic which treats low income patients will have antiquated equipment and supplies and that the staff will not be up to date on the latest dental information and procedures. The closing of two area dental schools in a state where 81% of the counties are designated as dental professional shortage areas has made this even more difficult.

It was fortunate that at a dental care advocacy meeting, the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Dentistry announced that they had received a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation five year grant to redesign their curriculum. The curriculum is now designed to prepare an oral healthcare workforce that is competent and committed to conquering the oral diseases of vulnerable populations. The dental students now spend 60 days a year in a public health setting. The clinic agreed to participate as an internship site as it is deeply committed to providing dental health services to children in need. This year five different students rotated through the program. The clinic dentists have enjoyed the “teaching” aspect of their role with the students and the students have all stated that they are much more comfortable working in a public health setting. Both the students and staff had to work through clinical expectations and many of the students said that their knowledge base of treating children of diverse origins with high dental needs was greatly expanded. Several students said they could envision working both in a private practice and a public health setting in the future. Another dental student related that his stereotypes of the patients had changed and found the experience very gratifying.

Next year we anticipate that two students during the 60 day period will provide care for over 800 patients, greatly assisting us in meeting the increased dental need. This program has been mutually beneficial for the students and the clinic. Mentoring dental student practitioners in a dental public health setting will introduce students to the many positives of working with diverse populations with high oral health need. Hopefully, the students may consider public health dentistry when they enter the workforce upon graduation.