

METRO COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER:

Teaching DDS Students the Medical Management of the Dental Patient

To maintain and improve the oral health of the public, dental student education must include training in medical management of dental patients. Future dental practitioners should gain first-hand experience with the following: obtaining a comprehensive health history and baseline vital signs, assessing an individual's risk for heart disease or stroke, and detecting early warning signs of other systemic diseases. Dentists must also be aware of signs of substance abuse, and evidence of malnutrition, physical abuse or neglect. A background in medical science is requisite; integrating this knowledge into the daily practice of clinical dentistry is a primary goal of dental education programs. However, dental and medical clinics are generally physically isolated from each other. This lack of physical proximity can act as a barrier for interprofessional care as well as interprofessional education. Patients with low health literacy are especially vulnerable; this population is less likely to successfully negotiate the challenges posed by geographic separation of clinics as well as the disparate approaches and priorities of the various healthcare professions. We seek to train future dentists to work seamlessly between the professions and to help patients navigate this divide.

To train future dentists in interprofessional health care, NYU Dentistry provides interprofessional training opportunities. We support an integrated basic science curriculum uniquely designed for dentists. Experience with patient care is gradually introduced early in the training sequence. NYU Dentistry students are trained to coordinate dental, medical, and behavioral health care with the goal of preventing disease and supporting overall wellness. Dental students at NYU are provided an opportunity to coordinate interprofessional health care for their patients at an onsite community health center.

Metro Community Health Centers: A Unique Inter-professional Opportunity

On October 1, 2020, Metro Community Health Centers, Inc. (MCHC) a federally qualified health center (FQHC), officially opened a general medical clinic at the NYU Dental College on the first floor of the Schwartz building.

The center offers primary and specialty medical care as well as behavioral health services. The majority of our patients are low-income and underserved, including medically and behaviorally complex patients. The new health center is operated by MCHC. MCHC currently operates five federally qualified health centers throughout New York City. The new health center at NYU Dentistry is the first MCHC clinic in Manhattan. Like NYU College of Dentistry, the MCHC clinic accepts Medicaid coverage.

Locating this new health center at NYU Dentistry provides an opportunity to implement collaborative practice models that improve and expedite identification of disease precursors and underlying conditions. Delivery of dental care and medical care under one roof is uncommon but logical, given that oral health and physical health are fundamentally intertwined. Poor oral health has been linked to increased risk for heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. Moreover, systemic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes increase the risk for periodontal disease. This unique collaborative practice approach will also reinforce and enhance dental student competence in the medical management of dental patients. Ultimately this approach will improve patient health and well-being, especially in vulnerable populations. For example, if a dental student identifies risk factors or untreated health conditions in their patients that need to be addressed before dental care can be provided, the student can escort the patient, with the patient's permission, to the medical clinic, where medical problems can be addressed without the patient ever leaving the building. This process will yield more timely attention to medical issues and more immediate dental care. If the dental provider refers the patient for external medical clearance, the patient might not seek medical care and they may forgo dental treatment.

MCHC specializes in supporting patients with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This specialization complements the care provided at NYU Dentistry's Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities, a treatment center dedicated to providing dental care for people with disabilities across the lifespan. The center thus reduces barriers for NYU dental patients in accessing behavioral as well as medical health care, as our students learn to provide holistic care for diverse populations. This partnership makes medical care come alive for dental students. Third- and fourth-year dental students work side-by-side with physicians to medically manage the student's own assigned dental patients who may not have many alternatives for their general health care.

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