

NYU DENTISTRY ORAL HEALTH CENTER FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES:

Learning to Provide Care for an Especially Vulnerable Population

In February 2019, NYU Dentistry opened the Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities (OHCPD). Housed in an ultramodern 8,000-square-foot facility, the Center is designed to provide comprehensive dental care for people with physical, cognitive, and developmental disabilities or medical conditions that prevent them from receiving care in a conventional dental clinic. A \$12 million renovation of the entire 8th floor of the NYU Dentistry Weissman Building provided updated and accessible clinical facilities and paved the way for the Center.

In addition to offering much-needed clinical services to patients, the OHCPD provides a unique training opportunity for our students. As we train the next generation of dentists, we seek to offer unique clinical care opportunities and challenges that extend the clinical skills and experience of our students. Clinical care at the OHCPD can be technically challenging and requires a balance of insight and compassion. We want every NYU dental student to gain clinical experience treating this population.

The need

People of all ages with disabilities face barriers to dental care. These obstacles include physical access to dental facilities that can accommodate a variety of disabilities. Even in this modern age not all dental offices can accommodate wheelchairs or other assistive devices. Moreover, not all dentists are experienced or prepared to treat this population. Many dentists lack experience with the diverse and unique challenges posed by this population. Accordingly, not all dentists are welcoming to disabled patients.

Patients with disabilities are often referred to hospitals for dental care. Some disabled patients may require sedation during treatment. These patients may wait as long as six months to get an appointment for clinical care in an operatory engineered for sedation. These visits are often one-off emergencies without follow-up or continuous preventive care. This approach to dental care is problematic; treatment is often not comprehensive, some dental problems are never fully addressed, and recurring or systemic problems are sometimes left untreated.

The OHCPD addresses a major public health challenge by providing comprehensive, compassionate dental care for people with a full range of disabilities. Many of these people lack sufficient access to regularly scheduled dental care that includes sustained treatment continuity over months and years. By providing dental care throughout the life of a patient, we seek to improve treatment continuity and break the cycle of neglect and repeated hospitalizations.

Designed for people with disabilities

The Center features nine spacious treatment rooms. Two additional fully equipped sedation suites provide infrastructure for inhaled or intravenous sedation that can be administered under the supervision of an anesthesiologist. These on-site sedation options eliminate the need for hospital referral for most cases. Accommodations for people with disabilities include the following:

- Wheelchair tilt
- Multisensory room
- Bariatric chairs
- Spacious, private treatment rooms
- Sedation (as required)

Training the next generation of dentists to treat people with disabilities

As soon as the OHCPD opened in 2019, third- and fourth-year dental students were assigned a series of full-day rotations in the new facility. By investing in curriculum changes and in clinical rotations at the Center, we seek to provide training that allows our dental graduates to treat patients with a variety of disabilities. We anticipate that our training program will encourage NYU-trained dentists to embrace disabled patients rather than discharge them to a hospital setting for dental care. It is our hope that even brief clinical exposure to this patient population in dental school will encourage graduates of NYU Dentistry to treat more patients with disabilities.

As part of our treatment and training approach we schedule longer appointments so that students have extra time to evaluate a patient's medical and psychological needs. This additional time also allows students to collaborate with and learn from faculty who are well-versed in providing comprehensive dental treatment to disabled people.

Because we are the largest dental school in the U.S., educating nearly 10% of our nation's dentists, we have the opportunity to educate a fair segment of the dentists in this country and make significant improvements in dental care for people with disabilities. Ultimately, we anticipate that fewer people with disabilities will be referred to hospital emergency rooms for dental treatment because more dentists will possess the knowledge, skill, experience, and compassion needed to provide dental care for this population.

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