

Guest Editorial

DON'T DISMISS SPECIAL NEEDS DENTISTRY



Dr. Clive Friedman

Not long ago, I had just completed extracting the tooth of a young girl with a mental and physical disability. She rose from the dental chair and, not batting an eye, said, "I love you. Can I get a hug?" Tears of joy rolled down my face and of course I gave her a hug. Once again, I was reminded of the innumerable gifts given to my staff and me by this very *special* group of persons.

What does special needs dentistry *really* mean? It is the act of providing oral health care to a segment of the population that has differing needs: people with disabilities who are differently able/d or are branded with whatever label society affixes to their way of being. Some dentists do not like seeing these patients, claiming that government plans barely cover costs.

After years in practice, we may be so set in our ways that venturing into

special needs territory is considered "beyond our comfort zone." There is absolutely no question that special needs cases are challenging. Consider a patient with autism. Instead of viewing this person with a combination of angst and indifference, I suggest you look at the situation from a different perspective. Can the challenge of treating such a patient bring excitement to your practice? Can the mere act of accomplishing a scaling be as spiritually rewarding as putting in a 6-unit bridge? Can you begin to perceive how working with an individual with autism could be a delightful opportunity to expand your horizons in a way that would help you find a whole new way to practise dentistry?

The exposure of most dentists to continuing education is usually related to attending a national meeting that focuses on a specific topic of interest, or learning about a particular technique (such as implants or endodontics), or finding ways to make more money and increase practice efficiency.

This year, there will be an opportunity to explore the mind-stretching area of special needs, with global leaders in this important aspect of our profession.

From August 21 to 27, Calgary and Banff will host the combined SCD (Special Care Dentistry) and IADH (International Association of Disability and Oral Health) Congress. This year's theme is "Building Bridges — Stepping Stones to the Future," and this unusual event will bring together speech therapists, occupational therapists and other professionals, all as equals devoted to the delivery of care. The primary objective of this eclectic gathering is to promote, explore and develop excellent oral health outcomes for this differently able/d population.

Norman Kunc will challenge the prevailing viewpoint that our role as dentists is to fill holes — to be the

"fixers" of patients' problems. What does it mean to serve our patients, rather than fix them? Speaker Deforia Lane will examine our delivery systems and introduce participants to ways in which music therapy may be used to provide better care. We will be asked to look at our communities and recognize that access to care is not the same everywhere in Canada. When such access is an issue in a country with vast resources such as ours, how much more complex is it for countries that lack our abundance of resources?

Topics such as the use of Botox in the treatment of facial pain will be covered at the congress, as well as the concept of using specially designed plates for children with Down syndrome from a young age to encourage normal speech development.

In this edition of *JCDA*, you'll find articles on related topics in the *Point of Care* section: clinical uses of the Erbium:YAG laser in special needs dentistry, treatment options for patients with oral motor disorders and children with oligodontia, and whether to prescribe prophylactic antibiotics for patients with body prostheses. The *Clinical Showcase* section presents the case of a special needs patient who received anterior resin crowns. The authors of these articles will also be speaking at the congress.

I invite you to indulge your sense of adventure, leave your preconceptions behind and plan to attend the combined SCD and IADH Congress. For more information, visit www.iadh.org and www.scdonline.org. Then spend a few days with people who have been deeply touched by those they treat and wish you to enjoy the same experience.

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