

Making Treatment of Special Needs Patients an Important Part of Your Growing Dental Practice



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KEYWORDS

- Special needs patients • Private practice • Hospital dentistry
- General practice residency • Continuum of care

KEY POINTS

- Many dentists who have completed hospital-based, general practice residency programs do not use all of the skills they have learned in their subsequent private practice careers.
- There is a tremendous need for dental treatment of patients with special needs in every community, especially with the aging population and increased longevity.
- Hospital affiliation can provide an opportunity to provide quality care for special needs patients, while creating visibility and enhancing the professional reputation of the dentist.
- Working with dental specialists in treating patients with special needs not only provides excellent treatment but also provides an opportunity to foster professional partnerships and practice growth.
- There is a place in a community for a dentist who wants ongoing relationships with special needs patients, to provide excellent treatment, and be paid as they would for any other patient.

Today many young dentists are looking to make their practices satisfying in ways other than only the financial rewards of dentistry. Some of these new practitioners have gained additional training in diagnosis and treatment of medically and physically challenging patients. Quite often, those dentists with additional training have found the treatment of special needs patients to be a gratifying application of the skills they learned in their postgraduate training. There is an opportunity to grow a practice through seeking those patients who require this type of care and develop the long-term relationships that are beneficial to both doctor and patients. As our society ages, and patients live longer, there will be demand for the dentist who has the

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training, desire, and ability to work with these special needs patients. This level of special care will be demonstrated to family and caregivers, and soon they will want to be patients in that kind of practice also. Word of mouth, along with the visibility that comes from treating patients with special needs, creates an opportunity to create trusting relationships with potential patients. By taking care of those who are most vulnerable, a dentist will earn a reputation as a caring, dedicated dentist who is interested in doing what is best for his or her patients.

THERE ARE DENTISTS TRAINED TO DO THIS

Today we have many general dentists who have completed hospital-based general dental residency programs.¹ These programs have been in existence for more than 50 years and are offered throughout the United States. This optional year of training is designed to give residents clinical and didactic opportunities that go beyond their training in dental school. Many recent graduates lack significant clinical experiences in comparison with graduates of previous years. Even more significantly, dental schools today are unable to provide the comprehensive treatment experiences for dental students in treating people with medically or physically compromising conditions. Although there may be some exposure to special needs patients, treatment planning and the clinical treatment of these challenging patients is an experience that most students will not receive in school. As dental schools provide fewer clinical experiences, the optional year of training is even more important in the development of the new dentist. Some states, such as New York, have recognized that additional training in all areas of dentistry is now essential to a recent graduate.²

In many programs accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA), treatment of patients with special needs is an important part of their curriculum. These patients include medically compromised, physically compromised, and geriatric patients. The goal of a hospital based general practice residency, as defined by CODA's goals, is to train general dentists who are knowledgeable in treating patients with special needs.³ This year or two of training comes at a time when young dentists are defining who they will be as dentists and as people. Yet this specially trained group of general dentists usually goes into private practice and blends in with all the other practitioners. They do not take advantage of many of the skills that they were taught or the experiences that they had in the general dental residency program. Quite often they do not recognize the depth and breadth of their training and how it has given them additional expertise in comparison with their peers.

Under pressure from senior dentists, practice consultants, and crushing student loan debt, they all too readily accept a model for a successful private practice and attempt to emulate that model. It may be the cosmetic practice or the sleep medicine practice or some other concept. The focus of this niche practice will change and will come and go with time. Although certainly there is an opportunity to build a practice only based on treating patients with special needs, there is another way that is more practical for young dentists. They can make the treatment of patients with special needs an inclusive and integral part of their practice, as all areas of our country are in need of dentists to treat those with special needs.

THERE IS DEMAND FOR SPECIAL NEEDS DENTISTRY

In the early 1980s, many states closed institutions where mentally and physically impaired patients were in residence. When a child was born with special needs, parents were advised to give up physical custody of the child. The child would then be institutionalized with the rationale that they could be best taken care of in that

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