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USC School of Dentistry News



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HEALTH NEWS THOUGHT

A Unique Approach to Dental Care for Autistic Patients

USC School of Dentistry Special Patients Clinic Tailors Treatment for Patients Needs

April is National Autism Awareness Month. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention autism may affect as many as 1 in 150 children, making it more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes and aids combined.

A visit to the dentist's office, complete with strange sounds, sights and smells, can give even a seasoned patient a twinge of anxiety. For patients with autism, many of whom are extremely sensitive to changes in routine, the experience can be downright horrifying. "Autistic individuals often crave sameness and repetition," says clinical professor Stephen Sobel. "To an autistic patient, the dental office can be a very strange new environment."

Sobel, who instructs all USC Dental Hygiene students how to care for patients with autism and other challenges, says autistic patients can face many obstacles in maintaining good oral and overall health – an especially big worry for the dental community as the rates of autism diagnoses continue to rise.

Clinical assistant professor Piedad Suarez says practitioners in the USC School of Dentistry Special Patients Clinic work hard to identify and serve the unique needs of its patients, including the many autistic individuals they serve. Operating the Special Patients Clinic for over 20 years, USC is one of only a few dental schools in Southern California to have a clinic dedicated to treating patients with medical, mental and physical challenges, she adds.

"We try to work not only with the patient but also with the whole family and keep them involved in the patient's care," Suarez says. "We take the time, help them create a routine and make sure they know just how important oral hygiene is. Sometimes, we can spend a whole morning with a patient just to desensitize them to the feeling of a toothbrush."

Suarez says the Special Patients Clinic receives many referrals from regional centers and hospitals due to their ability to tailor the dental experience for a patient's unique concerns, including the use of sedation, progressive exposure to the dental clinic before the first exam and employing parents or caregivers to help calm the patient in the exam room. This individualized approach is something that many other dental practitioners may find difficult to do.

To address this crucial need for dentists willing to treat those with autism and other special

concerns, the USC School of Dentistry requires every dental student to spend a weeklong rotation in the Special Patients Clinic.

To arrange for an interview and b-roll please contact Angelica Urquijo at (213) 740-6568.

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