

A Dental Clinic to Treat Special Needs Patients and Support Interprofessional Education

The University of Michigan School of Dentistry (UMSD) and Community Dental Center (CDC) provide dental services to patients often unable to receive treatment in private dental offices. For most of these patients, the cost for services is a barrier. Other patients present with significant health and behavioral challenges that limit their access to dental care. Two critical factors affect access to care; (1) these patients need providers with specific knowledge and experience, and (2) special needs patients benefit from integrated care with other professionals such as social workers, pharmacists, nurses, and physicians.



The UMSD cannot provide dental care for all special needs patients in the State of Michigan. However, we can train our students to treat these patients and know they will be better prepared to provide this care after graduation.

The two primary goals of the Special Needs and Interprofessional Education (SNIE) clinic are: (1) to train dental and dental hygiene students to assess and manage the treatment of special needs patients in the community; and, (2) to provide an environment in which dental and dental hygiene students can learn how to communicate and collaborate with providers from other health and social service professions to improve patient care outcomes.

Why does UMSD need a separate clinic for patients with special needs?

Providing services to patients with special needs in our main clinics is challenging and often impossible. First, appointments in these clinics usually last 2-3 hours, something most special needs patients cannot tolerate. Second, these main clinics only have partial walls separating patients. As a result, some of these patients are perceived as disruptive to the overall clinic since they cannot control their behavior and may be excessively vocal. Third, most dental clinics, including CDC, were designed to accommodate ambulatory patients. Lastly, these patients require dedicated personnel to be managed successfully. Dentists and hygienists with specialized training, in collaboration with health and social professionals will enable an efficient, safe and humane environment to deliver dental care.

What is the impact of a SNIE clinic?

The SNIE clinic will impact the School of Dentistry and dentists in Michigan in four ways. First, a significant number of patients who are currently unable to receive care will have treatment. Each year the School of Dentistry evaluates 12,000 new patients for comprehensive and emergency services. Approximately 4% of these individuals (for whom we presently are unable to provide care) present with special care needs and could be served in the SNIE clinic. Many of our existing patients of record will be better served in a special needs clinic atmosphere. Also, our hospital dental clinic receives 30-40 referrals a month that they are unable to accommodate and some would be seen in the SNIE. Second, the educational benefits will expand the dental workforce of providers who can treat patients with special needs by training dental, dental hygiene and graduate students. The interprofessional aspects will also expand the workforce of non-dental trained individuals who will be better poised to recognize and participate in dental health care settings. Third, the SNIE clinic will be highly prevention focused and hence in addition to improved oral health, these individuals will also benefit from counseling on overall health.

What types of patients are considered to have special needs?

The most common patients with special needs have developmental disabilities, cognitive impairments, complex medical problems, significant physical limitations, and the vulnerable elderly. Examples include patients with congenital conditions such as Down's syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, and muscular dystrophies. Other patients may have acquired or later-onset conditions such as traumatic brain injury, Tourette's syndrome, Huntington's Disease, Parkinson's Disease, ALS, schizophrenia, Alzheimer's and other dementias, post-stroke limitations, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetic neuropathy and other neuropathies and often include vulnerable populations like our Veterans.

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