

# The Community Health Center Dental Clinic

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With this issue of the *Journal*, we seek to demystify the community health center dental practice in order to develop the foundation for increased cooperation and collaboration between private practice and health center dental providers. Many of these articles have been written by ADA and CDA member dentists who are long-time employees of community health center dental programs. We hope that the information shared from this issue will lead to positive outcomes for patients and the profession.

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## GUEST EDITOR

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So what exactly is a health center? You probably drive by one on the way to work or you know a dentist who works for one. What does this dentist do that is different than what you do? And how exactly does a community health center provide dental care?

A community health center, CHC, is one type of a “safety net” clinic. The California Primary Care Association defines safety net clinics as the not-for-profit CHCs, county health departments, public hospitals, and other health care providers who share a common mission to provide care without regard of the patient’s ability to pay.<sup>1</sup>

According to The Health Resources and Services Administration, HRSA, of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the types of health centers include grant-supported federally qualified health centers, FQHCs, FQHC look-alikes,

outpatient health programs/facilities operated by tribal organizations, hospital-based, dental school, community public health department, or others.<sup>2</sup>

The term “community health center” has been replaced with the more appropriate (and legal) term “health center,” although the care provided at both is the same. You will find the authors of the articles in this *Journal* issue use the two terms interchangeably.

This issue brings together the many facets of providing dental care in the community health center environment, with most emphasis on

the federally qualified health center.

A community health center dental clinic in appearance is no different than a private practice. You will find all the comforts in a CHC as you would find in private dental office; from basic things like issues of *Highlights* and other magazines in the waiting room, to the latest composite materials and light curing units in the operatories. In fact, CHCs are audited and evaluated in quality assurance, patient safety, and patient care outcomes by federal, state, and local entities more frequently and consistently than private practices. Dr. Huong Le and I, both dental directors of FQHCs, discuss the

basics of how dental care is provided.

A common misunderstanding about health centers is the federal government pays all the expenses of a health center through grants indirectly from the taxpayer. This is not so. In fact, Section 330 grants provide funding that is typically a small percentage of the total cost of the operations of a health center. Employees of a health center do not work for the federal government. In this issue, Dr. Irene Hilton, clinical dentist at two FQHCs, examines the finances and funding of the CHC dental clinic.

How does a health center manage its patient care with challenges not seen in

the private sector? A patient in pain from a broken tooth or a tooth infection will go to a health center and receive treatment to relieve pain and suffering without having to pay a dime. This isn't possible nor expected of the dentist in the private dental office, but it is expected of the health center. Dr. Bob Russell, dental director at the Iowa Department of Public Health, presents the changing environment of managing the health center dental practice.

Dr. Jane Grover, immediate past first vice-president of the American Dental Association and current ADA consultant on health centers, examines the challenges a community health clinic and dental director overcome in managing a health center dental clinic, sometimes in between patient care.

A special mention goes to Colleen Lampron, executive director of National Network for Oral Health Access, for her tremendous help in making this issue happen, and for all the authors of this *Journal* issue, who authenticated all of our articles.

Health centers have an inherent mission to provide care to all, regardless of the barriers to health care that exist. It is reassuring to see this mission accomplished, one patient at a time. ■■■■

#### REFERENCES

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2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration, [bphc.hrsa.gov/about/](http://bphc.hrsa.gov/about/). Accessed Feb. 27, 2009.