

Central Oregon Community College and Local Dentists Give Back

By Barry Finnemore

THIS PAST YEAR, MEHDI SALARI, DMD, was volunteering at a dental clinic hosted by Central Oregon Community College that serves low-income residents in the Bend area when a retired couple came in for treatment. They had been longtime patients of Dr. Salari's at Skyline Dental, where he's practiced since the 1990s, but he hadn't seen them for a while and didn't know what had become of them.

It was a happy reunion. The couple, it turned out, had fallen on hard financial times and were excited to see Dr. Salari again and to know he would provide their care. For him, it was an opportunity to reconnect with and provide pro bono services to people he had developed a relationship with over some two decades.

"It was very heartwarming to help them, and they were thrilled and felt comfortable



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[getting treatment] because they knew me,” Dr. Salari said. “We visited after the appointment. It was super nice for me and for them.”

Various versions of that win-win scenario play themselves out regularly at the dental clinics, a partnership between the college and area dentists. In fact, the clinics, which began nearly a decade ago, have multiple benefits. They give dental assistant students in the college’s accredited, one-year program hands-on experience in a setting where they are comfortable and a connection with people in need. For their part, providers have an opportunity to give back, and earn continuing education credits in the process.

Salari calls the clinics a “feather in the cap” of the college and participating dentists.

The clinics, held two Fridays per month during the academic year, provide mostly X-rays, fillings and extractions to adults at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Among the people seen are military veterans who do not have access to dental services. The clinics also provide services such as cleanings and



debridements when hygienists volunteer. And patients who need dentures are referred to a local dentist who provides dentures at reduced rates, said Lynn Murray, dental assisting program director, dental clinic manager and a professor of dental assisting at the college.

Murray said the clinics, where about a dozen dentists volunteer, have been very well accepted. During the 2017-18 academic year, the clinics saw 158 patients and provided nearly \$86,000 in services, she said. The value of services provided the prior year was almost identical to this past year's total. Patients pay just a \$20 supply fee for each appointment, regardless of the extent of services.

"There's so much need out there, and dentistry is so expensive," Murray said.

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cases, have considerable unmet dental needs.

“It’s a really comfortable place to get your feet wet and get experience with chairside assisting,” Murray said. “One of the things that’s so nice for students is they are seeing a different group of patients than they would see in a general practice. In this clinic, we are seeing patients who haven’t been to a dentist in 10, sometimes 20 years, who have a lot more issues. It gives students a chance to be empathetic...and give back to those who are less fortunate. Some people really suffer with oral disease. I have seen a change in students’ attitudes, and we talk a lot about how dentistry is not something everyone has the same access to.”

Jeff Timm, DMD, has volunteered with the clinics since they began. He echoed Murray’s sentiment, saying the clinics are an impactful way for

individuals to come together and do their part to care for people less fortunate — and boost not only their health but their confidence. Dr. Timm touched on the story of young man who came to the clinics unable to get a job because of poor oral health. Through the course of several clinics, the young man got an improved smile and, eventually, found work.

Dr. Salari said it’s also invaluable for students to assist various dentists during the clinics. It exposes them to different workstyles and personalities and allows them to see that sometimes there’s more than one approach to a particular procedure.

“Everybody offers something different, and everybody’s communication is different,” he said. “There is so much variety. It’s an assistant’s job to adapt to all of that. It opens their eyes to anticipate the needs of dentists.”

Dr. Timm agreed, saying students are exposed to dentists’ different thought processes based on their training and experience and learn there are “different ways to tackle the same problem.”

Murray said the clinics are always in need of more volunteer dentists. Dr. Timm praised the dental community for its commitment to caring for the most vulnerable, both locally and overseas. He said the great thing about the COCC clinics is that they’re held in a well-equipped facility that makes it seamless for dentists to lend their time and expertise, right in “their backyard.”

“They make it easy to do,” Dr. Timm said. “I’ve sure enjoyed it.” 🗨️

To learn about the clinics, and to volunteer, please contact Lynn Murray at 541-383-7574, or lmurray@cocc.edu.