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6/19/2021

Boo at the Zoo

Oct. 11th, 2020, Duluth MN Lake Superior Zoo

Due to starting my dental career during the Covid-19 pandemic I have little volunteer experience as a dental personal. My experiences are limited to help at the Boo at the Zoo event this last October. Though this was such a small service program compared to Give Kids a Smile, Mission of Mercy, or Team Smile, it did give me a better perspective on the community's oral health. I set up a booth with four other dental hygiene students, we worked in collaboration with Colgate to distribute toothbrushes, toothpaste, floss, games, and toys for the kids.

Our goal was to educate children on preventative techniques they could use throughout their lifetime to maintain good oral health. During our time we were able to effectively show children brushing methods, and by the end of the day had many demonstrating proper techniques back to us. We were able to outreach to over 900 people throughout the day! Kids loved engaging with our typodonts and giant toothbrushes, and we had a matching game demonstrating good and bad foods for your teeth.

I was surprised at how many families in our area lacked proper knowledge of oral hygiene. After reading Weintraub's article *What Should Oral Health Professionals Know in 2040*, it makes sense that so many are not as informed as they should be. With the increasing changes in our demographic, there needs to be changes in our medical and oral healthcare

professional's education to better address patient needs. With our improvement in technology and the new information we're learning, we all need to be ready to take on new data and research to share with the public to better their understanding of oral health.

An observation I made during this volunteer experience is how critical it is to inform the parent or guardians of proper oral hygiene, rather than just focusing on the kids. So often during these events we get carried away with how sweet and fun the kids are and wanting to help them learn proper oral hygiene habits. However, it is more beneficial if we spend time talking directly with the parent, since so often the kids are not old enough to take care of themselves yet, or still lack the discipline to be consistent. Because of this, it is still on the parent to make sure their oral health is being properly taken care of; in the future, I will be spending more time informing them of proper oral health.

From this event I learned how much I love working with kids. I had never seriously considered pediatric dentistry, but after this event I realized how much I enjoy working with the younger population. Not only was I inspired by their eagerness to learn, but I also felt a strong connection for the less fortunate children. I met so many children that either were struggling with a mental disability or clearly suffering from bad living situations.

I remember multiple children from that day, but two stood out to me specifically. The first was a young 4-year-old girl who came to our table and was absolutely mesmerized by the typodont and toothbrush. We talked all about how she brushes and how much she even loves to floss—this was shocking to me at such a young age. When she went to do our matching game with the good and bad foods, she knew every single one and why they were bad for our teeth. It was encouraging to see someone so young being properly educated and taken care of.

I also had a younger boy and his mom come to our table; the boy was clearly struggling with a mental disability. I showed him the games and was asking about their brushing habits. The mom explained to me how they don't go to the dentist often because he can't sit still in the chair and none of the staff can work with him well. I was so impacted by my interaction with her, I couldn't imagine not being able to take my siblings (let alone future children) to the doctor or the dentist because the staff aren't capable of handling them... I encourage them to come to our clinic and see what we could do. They were such a sweet family, and it broke my heart that they weren't getting the care they needed. This is another reason why additional training is so necessary for healthcare workers. Had this family been at an office that had up-to-date education on dealing with children with disabilities, the boy may have had a much better experience.

Overall, this was an amazing learning experience for me. I was able to better understand how to properly educate children and parents and developed a passion for kids I wouldn't have known otherwise. I still have so much more to learn before I can volunteer at something like Give Kids a Smile or Mission of Mercy, but this experience gave me a better understanding of what to prepare for.

References

- Weintraub, J. A. (2017). What Should Oral Health Professionals Know in 2040: Executive Summary. *Journal of Dental Education*, 81(8), 1024–1032.
<https://doi.org/10.21815/jde.017.055>