It may sound unusual for someone pursuing a dental career, but I had my first visit to a dentist when I was 20. In China, many places do not have quality healthcare access, and it is unusual for people to visit a dentist unless something is seriously wrong. If my wisdom teeth never bothered me, I may not have seen a dentist until my thirties.

When I volunteered as a dental assistant and translator at the annual free dental clinic for Chinese immigrants in Pittsburgh, I realized that barriers that prevent people from getting dental care are not just geographical and cultural. For example, some patients there did not speak English at all and solely relied on my translation. Some patients did not have any insurance coverage and used the free clinic as their last resort. It hit me how challenging it could be for many people to receive dental care with these obstacles in place. I started thinking how big of a difference we could make if we broke down these barriers.

One big opportunity came on my mission trip in Jamaica a year ago. At a coffee farming village deep in the mountains, we learned that there were no dentists here at all, except for a few visiting dentists that came once every two or more years. One of my first patients had severe gingival bleeding along with a calculus bridge that held her loose teeth in place. When she learnt that the calculus needed to be removed, she refused to proceed with the procedure as she feared she would lose more teeth. I sat down with her and explained that if the “tartar” was not removed, the bacteria could impact her gum health further and eventually her bone underneath. She was shocked at first but soon nodded after my explanation. I told her that considering her limited chance of seeing dentists, she was doing her remaining teeth a favor by preventing future tooth loss. When I handed her a toothbrush kit as a gift at the end of her visit, her face suddenly beamed. That was when I learnt she did not have a toothbrush at home. I realized that these patients faced another set of challenges. Besides for locational and financial barriers, they were never educated on oral health and therefore lacked knowledge of basic oral hygiene maintenance. Although it was just a single visit for them and possibly their only one in the past two years, I was glad that I could make it a meaningful experience by providing both the treatment and oral hygiene instructions, which could have a long lasting effect on the patients and their families.

Soon after I returned to school, I had an experience that reminded me again of how important it is for us to consider each patient’s unique circumstance and help break barriers that make dental care inaccessible to them. As soon as I met this patient for the first time, I felt that something was unusual. As later revealed by her medical history, she was diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression and anxiety. She admitted that the last time she saw a dentist was more than 10 years ago due to the severe anxiety she experienced even upon the thought of a dental visit. I assured her that this appointment was just an initial exam and I would let her know every step I would take. As I explained each step to her as the exam proceeded, I noticed that she loosened up more and more. Her voice sounded less anxious and she became more talkative. By the end of the exam, I was recommended by the faculty to perform a full perio exam on her as the next step. Upon hearing that, the patient immediately tensed up and became alert again. After explaining to her what a perio exam entails, I remembered that she said the worst part of her dental anxiety was often before the appointment as she struggled mentally to make the visit. I decided to give her the option of starting the perio exam today so that next time when she came, we could finish it and make our treatment plan right after. I explained that doing so would save her a visit and hopefully be one less mental challenge for her. As she was considering, I commended her for her bravery of walking into a dental clinic again. She thanked me for the option and agreed to start the perio exam. After we finished, she told me this was the first dental visit during which she felt she could relax and breathe. “Let me know when you open your practice. I will be your first patient.” When I saw her again on our next scheduled appointment, and every single appointment afterwards, I knew I made a difference for her.

As I continue my effort in breaking barriers for my patients, I believe more advanced training in general dentistry will be a crucial next step for me to achieve my goal. With a general practice residency, I hope to expand my dental knowledge and hone my hand skills in multiple fields such as endodontics, oral surgery and implantology. By working with medically compromised patients, I can advance my medical knowledge while delivering dental care that they might have trouble getting from elsewhere due to their physical conditions. With the mentorship and exposure to challenging cases from a GPR, I will be able to evaluate different options and administer the best treatment possible to my patients.

I believe that achieving optimal health is the best way for people to own the full freedom to live an ideal life. With further training, I can help people achieve that goal by progressing my skills and knowledge in a clinical setting and breaking barriers that prevent people from accessing dental care. My experience has revealed to me how huge of an impact I can make by connecting to each patient. With a GPR training, I will be ready to impact not just more people, but more families and communities behind them as well.