

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

A Vision of Children's Dental Care

Access to dental care has been an issue since the days of FDR's New Deal—even in orthodontics, which has generally been regarded as elective treatment. Today, dentists are making access to care a reality for children in Southern California.

I recently had the opportunity to visit the Children's Dental Center in Inglewood. Dr. Cherilyn Sheets founded this center as a memorial tribute to her late father, who used the site as a general dental office for more than half a century. The younger Dr. Sheets—herself a world-renowned esthetic and restorative general dentist—remodeled, reshaped, and rebuilt this unpretentious dental office into a modern cathedral of children's dentistry. Its volunteer staff consists of general dentists, orthodontists, oral surgeons, and endodontists as well as pediatric specialists. Residents and graduate students of each of these disciplines, along with dental students, make up the rest of the providers. The chairside staff epitomizes dental professionalism as well.

The center is outfitted with remarkably up-to-date equipment. Several of the many individual operatories have surgical microscopes for endodontics and advanced restorative dentistry. The orthodontic equipment includes an essentially new cephalometer and panorex, a brand-new welder, a full assortment of pliers, and every conceivable wire, band, bracket, and auxiliary. The sterilization room is also state-of-the-art, with new ultrasonic cleaners, antioxidant baths, and autoclaves that would make a small hospital's infection-control staff turn green with envy. At present, there are about 200 comprehensive orthodontic cases in progress. Most of them would be considered ABO quality.

In fact, for being located in what is considered one of Los Angeles's roughest inner-city areas, the quality of people, facility, and, most important, care is absolutely outstanding. If you were to somehow be teleported into the clinic without driving through the surrounding neighborhoods to get there, you would guess that you were in one of the highest-class neighborhoods in Southern Cali-

fornia. I would gladly take my own children there with confidence that they were receiving the best treatment possible.

The children who come to this clinic receive no government money whatsoever in support of their treatment—no DentiCal, no CCS. They are the kids who have fallen through the social safety net. Mom and Dad (and both usually come to the appointments) are generally working several underpaid jobs between them to make ends meet. Cheryl established this clinic specifically to provide the same level of care to these children of the working poor as is provided as a matter of course to the children of the rich. In so doing, the center elevates the kids' own self-esteem and expectations of themselves. It's important to note that none of the care is provided for free. The fee is determined based on the family's ability to pay. Some, very few, get the care and then skip out on the payment. But for the most part, these people that the rest of us would consider "poor" are proud and prompt about keeping their accounts current.

Private individuals, foundations, and major dental manufacturers have donated most of the equipment and supplies. Dr. Sheets has purchased quite a bit of it out of her own pocket.

Most of the doctors who work there do so on a volunteer basis. Before I left, I had a wonderful chat with one of the volunteer orthodontists who provides comprehensive care at the facility two days a month. When I asked why the center does not accept government funds to support patient treatment, he replied that the intense levels of bureaucratic red tape and paperwork involved made it not worth the trouble. "It just feels bad," he said. When I asked why he provides care at the center without compensation, he replied, "It just feels so good." Therein lies the answer to the access-to-care dilemma.

With her remarkable tribute to her father, Dr. Cheryl Sheets has made a loud and clear statement: that access to care, in the final analysis, lies in the hands of gifted and generous volunteers. They are doctors, like ourselves, who choose to treat certain patients for free or reduced fees. They are corporate or individual sponsors who supply places like the Children's Dental Center. They are always much more compassionate—and much more efficient—than any government bureaucracy. The smiles that come out of the Children's Dental Center bear strong witness to that.

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