

Promoting Public Dental Health BY ROMALYN TILGHMAN

Many of us in Southern California follow a local columnist in the *Los Angeles Times*; Steve Lopez, a tenacious journalist uncovers the specific human interest story to highlight the ills of our society. He is a brilliant writer, no one is off limits, and every time he takes on his own publisher or the power structure of the community or the state, we worry he'll be fired. You may have heard of him even if you don't live here. His account of a homeless Julliard-trained violinist, Nathaniel Ayers, has been fictionalized in a touching new movie, *The Soloist*.

This weekend, Lopez told us the heart-warming story of a woman, down on her luck, with several abscessed teeth and in excruciating pain, trying to find relief. By the time Lopez talked to her, she'd found a dentist who'd treated her for "practically nothing." When he interviewed the dentist who'd given the service, he was led to more good deeds and extraordinary generous work – programs at the Watts Christian Health Center, the Ventura County Rescue Mission, a program called MEND (Meet Each Need with Dignity) in Pacoima, and even a program at the Los Angeles Zoo.

For several months now, we've wanted to tell you about a project that has made increased dental care for underserved populations its primary goal – Dental Pipeline, the Profession and Practice Community-based Dental Education Program. It is co-directed by Allan Formicola, D.D.S. and Dr. Howard Bailit,

who have been working with dental schools to train graduates with the cultural knowledge and communication skills they need to treat racially and ethnically diverse patients, increase student body diversity, and graduate more dentists who choose to practice in communities-in-need. Through the Dental Pipeline program, they have worked with dental schools to provide cultural competency training, added more information on public health, and have sent their senior students out to practices in partnership with 237 community-based clinics. Eighteen dental schools have participated in the program. (See box, page 3.)

How can dentists and oral health care professionals become more involved?

Dr. Formicola has a few suggestions.

"Dentists can serve on a town's health committee to bring in advice. In places where there are dental clinics, they can volunteer some of their services and many of them do that. The American Dental Education reports that dentists provide many thousands of hours volunteering their services to clinics in many community settings. On the national level, they can advocate for improving the dental benefits under Medicaid for children and adults. While some dental care for children is required under Medicaid, it is not for adults and few states cover dental care for low-income adults.

"The most important point to get across is to recognize that it will take all segments of the profession and the government working together to improve the oral health of those less fortunate in America. The dental profession has done an excellent job in the area of prevention. Our job now is to get prevention to all and to open up access to treat those with limited access to care. Many millions of school hours are lost each year because of children experiencing toothaches and infections. Volunteering service to organizations such as the Boys and Girls clubs that support clinics and other such organizations is a good way for all to become involved."

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One happy ending? That woman with the abscessed tooth Steve Lopez told us about is off to do her own volunteer work at a senior center, now that her pain is alleviated. One good deed can truly lead to another. If you've had good fortune, pass it on!

Participants of the Pipeline Profession and Practice Community-Based Dental Education Program

Round 1 (2002-2007)

Boston University
Howard University
Meharry Medical College
Temple University
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
University of California at San Francisco
University of Connecticut Health Center
University of Illinois at Chicago
University of Washington
West Virginia University
Loma Linda University
University of California at Los Angeles
University of the Pacific
University of Southern California
Ohio State University

Round 2 (2008-2010)

A.T. Still University of Health Sciences
Creighton University
Texas A&M Health Science Center
Medical College of Georgia Research Institute, Inc.
University of Maryland at Baltimore
University of Florida
University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey
Virginia Commonwealth University