



Bringing Dental Care Home

Seeing a dentist has gotten easier for the elderly, disabled and low-income populations, thanks to a new project developed at the Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry's Pacific Center for Special Care.

Through the Virtual Dental Home (VDH) project, some of the state's neediest residents are able to connect with a dentist through technology and a community-based model of delivering dental care. Led by Pacific Center for Special Care Director Paul Glassman, the VDH project has also been recognized by researchers and foundations for demonstrating an innovative approach to reaching underserved populations.



“Many people are realizing that new and innovative strategies will be needed to address the profound health disparities among underserved populations.”

— Paul Glassman, Pacific Center for Special Care Director

New Model for Dental Care

Glassman’s groundbreaking Virtual Dental Home project is demonstrating a model that delivers essential and cost-effective dental service in community settings where people live, go to work or school, or receive other healthcare.

The VDH project uses the latest technology to link practitioners in the community with dentists at remote office sites. Portable imaging devices and other technologies allow hygienists and other health professionals to upload photos and X-rays. From there, they can consult with a dentist working offsite.

Glassman and colleagues spent more than three years developing VDH before the first patient was seen. Now there are 11 sites, from Eureka to the Mexican border, where the demonstration project operates. So far, about 1,000 patients have been served at the project sites.

Using technologies such as emailing patient x-rays is not unusual, but the comprehensive care that VDH is able to provide — allowing dentists to be involved remotely with health personnel serving patients out in the community — is unique. “There aren’t any other programs in the country like this,” said Glassman.

Improving Health for the Underserved

Glassman says the severe dental neglect often seen in underserved communities can result in missed school or work, hospitalization and sometimes death. For some of the patients, the most important technology they encounter may be a toothbrush.

“One boy came from a large, very poor family, and he came in thinking that his mouth was in really bad shape,” says Glassman, referring to a project site at a San Diego school. “But he simply had food buildup and calcified bacteria from not brushing.” The hygienist cleaned the child’s teeth and provided him with his first toothbrush.

In addition to providing care and treatment, the VDH project is helping patients develop a more positive outlook about visiting the dentist. “Children come into a room with friendly posters and are greeted by a dental hygienist who is very warm and receptive, and they start to associate some positives with dentistry,” says Terry Press-Dawson, a school counselor at Harmon Johnson Elementary in Sacramento, where the VDH project operates onsite twice a week.

“Because of the coordination of services between Pacific’s program and the wonderful local dentist,” Press-Dawson adds, “there have been several children at the school with severe dental pain who have been seen on an emergency basis and had care that they couldn’t have gotten otherwise.”

A Passion That’s Been Noticed

Glassman has a passion for the innovative model he helped develop, and his enthusiasm has been shared. In the three years since the VDH project began, the Pacific Center for Special Care has received more than \$4 million in grants to expand the effort. Most recently, the center was awarded \$1.2 million from the Los Angeles First 5 and San Mateo First 5 commissions to grow the project in those areas.

VDH received another nod of recognition when Dugoni professors were chosen as contributors to the July 2012 issue of the *Journal of the California Dental Association*. The issue was dedicated to VDH, with Glassman serving as the guest editor, and staff and other faculty members contributing six manuscripts. “Many people are realizing that new and innovative strategies will be needed to address the profound health disparities among underserved populations,” Glassman wrote in his introductory editorial.

Currently, there are multiple models being developed and tested in the United States, he said. Among them is the VDH system that brings care to where patients are. “The Virtual Dental Home system has significant potential to improve oral health” for the underserved, he wrote.

Changing Healthcare Policy

Glassman believes the value of the VDH approach will be seen over time. The VDH project challenges the traditional reimbursement system for dentistry, which is based on surgical procedures, and instead emphasizes prevention, use of medications and education. “This is a better way of using our scarce resources,” he says. “In time, we can have dental care reimbursement systems that reflect that.”

Glassman is continuing to collect data about the number of people served, the kind of procedures they’re getting and the health outcomes, as well as the financial implications of the project. So far, the news is good.

“A very preliminary analysis shows we can deliver dental services at a lower cost than what is currently being paid in the California Medicaid system,” he said.

