



Thursday Memo – January 28, 2016

Caring for the Underserved – by Nicholas Hajj

Oral health is an important aspect of an individual's overall health, yet it often gets overlooked when trying to learn all that is involved with caring for a patient medically. Over the past month, I have had several experiences that have taught me about oral health and its delivery to those who need it most. The UMass Care Mobile impressed me the most with its commitment to providing dental hygiene assistance to the uninsured, and one patient encounter in particular illustrated how important such a resource can be.

The Care Mobile demonstrated an excellent model for providing care to the underserved. First of all, the clinic model itself was perfectly designed to meet the needs of underserved communities in Worcester, moving to different underserved communities on different days of the week to help provide medical and dental access to those who often did not have any. Jamie Russell, the dental hygienist I worked with, was exceptional. She made everyone feel welcome and comfortable and did an excellent job of making her patients feel comfortable. She also spent time talking with each patient and educating them on how to properly care for their teeth. Despite some of her patients' lack of understanding regarding oral health, she was very patient and managed to communicate areas of improvement in a nonjudgmental way. These qualities made a tremendous impact on the care of the last patient we saw that day.

Jamie's last patient served as a perfect example of who the Care Mobile helps the most. The patient was referred by Infectious Disease from UMass following a hospitalization for sepsis. She was recovering from a long history of intravenous drug use and had recently been diagnosed with HIV and hepatitis, having been without medical or dental care for many years. Her visit to Jamie was part of the beginning of her comprehensive care, as she had a broken tooth that was giving her much pain and was a likely source of infection. The pain was bad enough that it prevented her from eating and made her feel like she needed pain treatment, which put her at risk of relapsing back to the opiates and heroin she had been addicted to. Despite having come to Jamie of her own free will in hopes of having some pain relief, the patient was extremely scared, anxious, and tearful. Jamie first spent several minutes just talking with the patient and reassuring her, only moving to the oral exam when the patient had been calmed. After cleaning the patient's teeth, Jamie explained to the patient what was going on with her painful tooth and what would need to be done about it. She then took the time to make some phone calls, getting medical clearance for an extraction and scheduling an appointment with a local oral surgeon who would be willing to perform the procedure for her despite her inability to

pay. In all, Jamie spent an hour managing the care of this complex patient, and the patient left expressing her gratitude for all the help she received.

Access to dental care is a problem for those who cannot afford it, but the Care Mobile presents an ideal solution. Their willingness to offer affordable, local care made a difference in the lives of the patients that I saw that day, and I would love to utilize them as a resource in my future practice.