



Dental Public Health Activities Descriptive Summaries

Practice Number: 48005
Submitted By: Greater Memphis Area Special Olympics
Submission Date: March 2007
Last Updated: March 2007

Greater Memphis Area Special Olympics Special Smiles Program

The Memphis Special Olympics Special Smiles Program is an annual event developed and initiated in 1999 and held in conjunction with the Greater Memphis Area Special Olympics Track and Field Competition. Each year Special Olympics Athletes, aged 8 to 60 years, receive dental screenings, oral hygiene instruction, nutritional counseling, and commemorative canvas bags containing a toothbrush, toothpaste and dental health education information. This annual event brings together University of Tennessee dental faculty, dental residents, students and staff, hospital personnel, private dental practitioners, dental hygienists, dental assistants and community lay persons who work side by side to conduct the screenings and provide the dental prevention instruction. Historically, individuals with intellectual disabilities have often been unable to access necessary comprehensive dental services in their local communities due to inadequate professional education and clinical exposure to patients with special health care needs during dental school and postgraduate training, professional attitudes toward individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities, and inadequate reimbursement levels for clinicians willing to provide dental care. Research studies and surveys have demonstrated that dental students and recent graduates are more likely to provide dental care for individuals with intellectual disabilities if they had adequate didactic and clinical instruction during their dental education. The Special Olympics Special Smiles Program receives financial support from the Memphis Dental Society, Special Olympics, and several corporate sponsors to underwrite the cost of the program which averages \$3,500.00 per year. All of the dental supplies needed to conduct the screenings are supplied by Patterson Dental Company. To date over 4,000 athletes have participated in this dental health education program. Professional volunteers to staff the event averages 60- 70 per year. Access to comprehensive dental services has improved in the local community due to the increased awareness by dental professionals and recent graduates regarding the dental health care disparity endured by individuals with intellectual disabilities. After participating in the Special Smiles Program, many practitioners become comfortable welcoming patients with intellectual disabilities into their practices. Finally, this grassroots program can be replicated throughout the United States to improve dental care for a most vulnerable and often neglected population.

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