

A NEW DAY AT SMILE STARTERS



Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Rafael Rivera, Jr., D.D.S. and I'm a general dentist. My offices provide dental services to children and young adults across the state of North Carolina. As the new owner of "Smile Starters," I recently introduced myself to a colleague in the public health sector. He politely responded, "You're brave." I replied, "I believe in what we do." I presume he was referring to the negativity associated with our organization and its previous owners as a result of federal and state investigations in 2002-2003 related to treatment rendered in our offices. In truth I'm accustomed to these types of responses and I welcome them as it offers an opportunity to clear the proverbial air. Interestingly enough, the decision to purchase Smile Starters (where I had been employed for the past five years) was an easy one. Simply put, I believe in the individuals who make up the strength of our organization and our ability to provide compassionate quality dental services as part of an overall effort to improve access to dental care.

"What about all that stuff in the media?" you ask. After all, Smile Starters providers have been portrayed as monsters lacking compassion that misdiagnose and over treat dental caries while placing stainless steel crowns on every available tooth and utilizing a papoose for every single patient simply to take advantage of the Medicaid reimbursement system and line our pockets. Before responding, I draw your attention to the problem. Dental related visits to the emergency room are on the rise. Dental caries in toddlers is on the rise. In the state of North Carolina for the under 21 year old segment, there are 984,530 Medicaid recipients eligible for dental services yet only 40% received some sort of dental care. Of all eligible Medicaid participants only 31% received some sort of dental care. On the other hand, NC citizens have much to celebrate as over half of our active licensed dentists participate in Medicaid on some level. The media sure doesn't share those facts.

In 2000 the Surgeon General labeled tooth decay as the "Silent Epidemic." Eight years later, we're still living with the problem. On a daily basis, Early Childhood Caries rears its ugly head in our offices. Our patients present with unique challenges and complexities which we understand and embrace. We see the incredible need for dental services in the underprivileged and refuse to turn a blind eye to the problem while complaining of a "poor reimbursement" system. Rather we dutifully perform this job because we enjoy making a difference in the lives our patients. In our office Medicaid is merely a form of insurance rather than a social status and we provide patients the specialized attention they deserve. Ultimately, we don't just talk about the

access to care problem, we actually do something about it.

Here are some Smile Starters facts which might interest you and address the question posed above. We had over 120,000 patient visits in 2007. Though we treat high numbers of patients, quality treatment always comes first in our practice. Providers complete a thorough orientation which includes literature review of behavior management techniques, restorative techniques, anesthesia dosage and administration, and how to overcome the challenges inherent in treating our unique patient population. Treatment rendered is limited at each visit. We custom tailor treatment plans to each individual patient. Treatment plans are always formulated based on documented clinical finding supported by radiographs or photographs. Prior to beginning any procedure, options to treatment are thoroughly explained to the patient or their parent and signed informed consent is obtained. Informed consent is obtained prior to utilizing protective immobilization. We endeavor to insure each patient has a pleasant and unique successful dental visit. We consulted with pediatric experts to insure we are operating within the standard of care. We instituted a compliance program to insure quality care is rendered on all levels. We make nitrous oxide available whenever possible and are building relationships with local providers to offer dental services under general anesthesia. I value education and make every effort to provide education and training to my staff.

I'm pleased to report access to dental care for patients under 21 years of age in North Carolina has improved each year from 2001 to 2007. While I'm unsure how much of a contribution Smile Starters made during that time, it excites me to know we played an active role in helping these deserving patients. Medicaid reimbursements still make up the bulk of our revenues and we will work diligently to build lifelong healthy relationships with DMA and other regulatory agencies. My vision is to become a respected health care leader recognized for improving access to the highest quality compassionate dental care with an emphasis on excellent customer service.

In truth, I could easily change the focus of the practice and transition to a more traditional private practice dental model. I could even go to the other extreme and head down the road of spa dentistry. Yet we stay the course and remain dedicated to helping this patient population. Nevertheless, seeing is believing. If you're still unsure about us and what we do, feel free to give us a call. We wish to build lifelong relationships with local area providers and we welcome your visit to our offices. ■

Yours in Health, Rafael Rivera, Jr., DDS