

Dental Hygienists

Home & Away



Dental Hygiene Hits the Streets of St. John's

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One of my late father-in-law's favourite expressions was, "if you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life." This pretty much captures how I feel about almost 35 years of practising as a dental hygienist. I love what I do so much that very often on my day off you will find me volunteering at the Gathering Place Dental Clinic here in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

As a dental hygienist, I've always wanted to give back to my community but never really found an outlet to do so. Then, in 2017, I received an email from a local Memorial University graduate student who was doing her research in public health. Enter Katrina Bartellas! Katrina was working on a project entitled *Integrating Dental Services Into a Primary Health Care Initiative for Low-Income Individuals in St. John's*.¹ She had volunteered in a community centre called The Gathering Place (GP) and had witnessed firsthand the barriers to dental care faced by many who struggle every day to find their way. Upon reaching out to the chief executive officer, Joanne Thompson, Katrina found that she had a very willing partner. Encouraged, she then contacted the Newfoundland and Labrador Dental Hygienists Association (NLDHA), the Newfoundland and Labrador Dental Association (NLDA), and Choices for Youth (a community centre for youth). Once again, the response was quick and positive. Thus the visioning began.

Katrina's research sparked an interest within the community. Through much collaboration and significant sweat and financial contributions, that spark became a flame. The

dream of having a dental clinic that provides free services to those in need came to be when the Gathering Place Dental Clinic opened its doors to the public in December 2018. Everyone was thrilled to see their efforts come to fruition and I was thrilled to have a place to give back with what I know best!



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The GP (kindnesswanted.ca/) community health centre is an amazing facility that has been in existence since 1994. In addition to providing three hot meals a day during the week and brunch on the weekends, it has grown into a full-service community health and wellness centre. Augmenting the medical clinic and new dental clinic are myriad other facilities, services, and activities. The people who access the facility are referred to as guests, and a sign hangs on the wall that says, "There is no 'nobody' here." The GP relies on its volunteers to provide support to over 2000 guests each week.

Volunteer dental hygienists, dentists, and dental assistants staff the two-chair dental clinic. Funds raised from services that are covered by the government-funded adult dental program go towards supplies to keep the clinic running. The one paid employee is an assistant/receptionist who handles the running of the clinical operations. The clinic provides treatment to a marginalized population

who otherwise wouldn't have access to care. Many face a range of problems such as addictions, chronic pain, and poverty. Because the GP is centrally located and the guests feel at home, they can more easily access the clinic and feel less nervous about receiving treatment.



This is the first venture of its kind that NLDHA has been involved with; the association jumped on board at the outset. Joanne Thompson describes the process well: “From our earliest conversations at the NLDHA, you demonstrated your compassion and care through the level of your engagement in seeing this idea move to a dynamic and impactful service. You have gifted expertise, time and financial aid to ensuring the most vulnerable adults in our society have access to dental hygiene services.” There are a tremendous number of details involved in getting something like this up and running, and NLDHA is proud of the role it was able to play.

On a personal level, I’d really like to share some more about what it means to be a volunteer. The days I’m scheduled to volunteer I wake up with a smile on my face and raring to go! Becoming part of this community has allowed me to provide services that couldn’t otherwise be accessed due to financial hardship and/or life circumstances. In addition, teaching people how to take better care of their mouths contributes to better overall health outcomes. Equally important to healing is the fact that these guests have the time and opportunity to tell their stories without the fear of being judged. They feel heard and accepted. I feel privileged to be making new relationships with people I may never otherwise have met. It’s also a great reminder that we’re all human and we all start out the same. Everyone has a story. Being able to learn about people and their life journeys has brought me great insight and joy. Moreover, the smiles and hugs I receive are a bonus! In fact, as good as I feel walking into the clinic to volunteer, I leave feeling even more inspired and energized.

Which raises the question, why does the person providing service feel as good as those who are receiving it? Apparently this isn’t a new topic. According to *The Paradox of Generosity*,² those who give their time to volunteer feel as though they have more time on their hands, and those who give money to charities feel they are wealthier. A quick Google search will find many studies showing that the more we volunteer, the happier we become and that there is a healing power that comes from helping others. As it turns out, we humans are hardwired to help others.³ Allan Luks and Peggy Payne have taken an even closer look at this in their book, *The Healing Power of Doing Good*.⁴ According to their research, helping others has been proven to reduce stress, combat anxiety and depression, provide mental stimulation and a sense of purpose as well as reduce the risk of dying! Who knew? Luks and Payne found that volunteers are ten times more likely to be in good health than those who don’t volunteer. Their work points to a biochemical explanation. Volunteering reduces the body’s stress and releases endorphins, which are the brain’s natural painkillers. The trick to all of this is that you truly need to enjoy what it is you choose to do as a volunteer.

With all the links between volunteerism and good health, you’d think it would become the norm for doctors to start prescribing “volunteering” as an antidote to the many stress-based illnesses that prevail in our society. It’s certainly working for me. If you haven’t already done so, give volunteering a try. Let’s see if we can bring some healing to those in need while re-energizing ourselves and adding joy to the world.

References

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