

Student Scene



Paying it Forward, Part Two: Special Olympics

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“Let me win but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.”¹ This is the oath that defines the athletes of the Special Olympics. Celebrating its 50th anniversary, the Special Olympics is the world’s largest sports organization in support of children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

In 1968 Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of President John F. Kennedy, inspired by their sister Rosemary’s intellectual challenges, founded this extraordinary organization. Her vision was to highlight the competitive athletic capabilities of people with disabilities. That same year in Chicago approximately 1,000 athletes from the United States and Canada took part in the one-day event.

The Special Olympics Healthy Athletes program is designed to help Special Olympians improve their overall health and fitness. Components of Special Olympics Healthy Athletes include Opening Eyes (1991), Special Smiles (1992), FUNfitness (1999), Healthy Hearing (2000), Health Promotion (2001), and Fit Feet (2003).²

The Special Smiles component was initiated by Dr. Steven P Perlman, the pediatric dentist who treated Rosemary Kennedy. He became aware of the struggles the family had experienced when seeking specialized dental care for Rosemary; her dental care with Dr. Perlman started when she was 63. The Special Smiles program offers dental screenings, health education, and prevention services and refers athletes to potential sources of treatment and follow-up care.²

The dental hygiene department at John Abbott College (JAC) partnered with Olympiques Spéciaux Québec on May 5 in Verdun where 200 Special Olympians were participating in a floor hockey tournament. Three faculty members and eighteen students participated in this public dental health event offering dental and oral disease screenings, oral hygiene instruction (OHI), and information relating to caries, athletic mouthguards, nutrition, and harmful oral habits including tobacco use.



Students equipped with their loupes and light attachments or handheld illumination used disposable mouth mirrors to perform the screenings.

The athletes presented with a variety of challenges. Some were hearing and speech impaired, while others struggled with attention deficiencies or difficulty with fine motor skills. The morning’s group were given dental and oral disease screenings by soon-to-be- graduates while the second-year students offered OHI specific to the athletes’ needs as well as supporting information on a variety of dental-specific topics. By evaluating the brushing methods demonstrated by the athletes using a large typodont, the students were able to modify the athletes’ techniques and introduce floss sticks to aid in the removal of biofilm and debris from interdental surfaces. Each athlete received a report card designed to provide their family members and caregivers with information as to whether regular maintenance or urgent dental care was recommended. That afternoon the routine was repeated with some third-year students replacing the second-year volunteers who were unable to participate for the full day. Throughout the day faculty supervised, offered expert opinions during the dental screenings, and completed screenings with OHI when time permitted.

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Gift bags, compliments of Sunstar and Procter and Gamble, included a toothbrush, floss sticks, toothpaste, and the sanitized dental mirror used in the screening. A summary card specifying the OHI given and highlights from the discussions, as well as contact information for La Clinique dentaire de l'Université de Montréal and McGill University Dental Clinic with their respective summer dental clinic hours was included.

Of the 122 athletes screened, 13 were identified as in need of urgent dental care, which aligns with statistics that indicate approximately 10% to 14% of this population require immediate attention.³ The JAC students and faculty were grateful for the opportunity to learn how to better interact with this clientele, and the athletes left with valuable knowledge and a smile.



Our professional identity statement is "I am a dental hygienist. I educate and empower Canadians to embrace their oral health for better overall health and well-being."⁴ Let us move forward remembering that one person, Dr. Perlman, having reached out to help and support one family, created the Special Smiles program and, in so doing, has had a positive impact on the oral health of thousands worldwide. One person, with passion and commitment, can make a difference. Each of us, as dental hygienists, can use our knowledge, compassion, and advocacy for the betterment of any specific population. Take a small step towards improving the lives of others and I guarantee you will not only make a difference but walk away with a sense of fulfillment.

References

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