

Emergency dental clinics: providing a service to the community and invaluable experience to dental students

There are a variety of ways patients experiencing a dental emergency can seek care. Whether it be through calling their private practice dental practitioner for an overnight toothache, or walking into the local emergency department, patients with economic affordability are able to access emergency dental care. However, it is the treatment of the low socioeconomic strata's emergency and urgent dental needs that poses a dilemma. These patients may not have an established dental home. Due to their financial restrictions, dental care may not always be their top priority. So, the question arises, where do these patients seek care? Many of them tend to wait until they are in significant pain before searching for a dental practitioner, and they are often unaware of dental emergency facilities that may be in their communities. Once the problematic tooth is past their pain threshold, many patients find themselves waiting in the hospital emergency room for hours for dental pain. Due to the lack of availability of dental providers in hospital settings, patients are often prescribed antibiotics and painkillers. Although antibiotics aid in controlling the systemic symptoms of an infection, they do not treat the source of the issue. After an antibiotic prescription, patients are usually encouraged to seek a dental practitioner. It is for these low income patients that dental school emergency clinics become a key point of service.

Most dental schools manage emergency patients by either incorporating them into their comprehensive care clinics or implementing an emergency clinic rotation as a part of the dental students' curriculum. The patients who seek care at the dental school's emergency clinic often do not have the financial means to afford a private practice dental practitioner. Due to the lower prices for treatment offered by dental schools, alongside a broad range of insurance acceptance and long-term payment plans, patients are able to better afford dental care. Thus, the dental school's emergency clinics serve as a critical source for dental care in low socioeconomic populations. These clinics have a wide catchment area and serve a diverse population base. They are an important asset for public oral health and access to oral health care.

There is no doubt that dental school emergency clinics provide a significant service to their communities. It is also import-

ant to recognize the invaluable experience these clinics provide for the dental students that rotate through them. Different dental schools have a variety of modalities for dental students to experience emergency dental care. One possible platform of delivery could be a few weeks' rotation through the dental school's emergency clinic during the students' clinical practice years. The experience students gain by triaging and treating emergency patients is critical to the development of novice dental practitioners. It is in these emergency situations that students learn the value of understanding the patient's chief complaint. During comprehensive care clinics, the focus of the appointment is around the patient's overall oral health. This is contrasted with the patients in emergency who often present with severe pain in one area and expect resolution of their specific ailment. Students learn the value of listening to their patients describe the key symptoms, and in formulating an educated potential diagnosis prior to testing. They often have the opportunity to use their medical history interpretation skills to identify medical conditions or medications that may impact their emergency treatment. Once the main area of concern has been isolated, students have the opportunity to hone their diagnostic testing skills by performing percussion, palpation, temperature sensitivity, mobility, probing, and other examinations on their patients. Sometimes it is difficult for students to identify the most problematic area. Due to the population seeking care at these emergency clinics, many patients have generalized poor oral health and multiple potential offending teeth. This is a challenge that is unique to the emergency situation. In order to be able to provide effective and efficient care, students develop the skills to isolate the most problematic area since triaging the entire oral cavity is neither practical nor pertinent in an emergency situation. Through the guidance of instructors, students are able to diagnose and treatment plan the necessary procedure. Many patients present with irreversible pulpitis or necrotic teeth that have led the patient to seek emergency dental care. Cases of trauma (ie, avulsion, complicated fractures) are sometimes referred to the graduate programs for immediate treatment. Depending on the organiza-

tion of the dental school, the endodontic or oral surgery treatment can be provided by the dental student or by specialty residents. Either way, by following the process of triage and patient management, students develop specific skills to manage dental emergencies once in their future practice.

Dental school emergency clinics serve not only their community, but also the dental students that rotate through them. These clinics are a significant resource for patients who have exhausted other avenues of dental care or cannot afford private dental clinics. Patients with various access to care issues find themselves only being able to seek oral care through the dental school's emergency clinics. By going through the emergency rotation, students learn to triage efficiently on a patient in significant pain. Often, it is also the first time the patient has been in contact with a dental provider in a long time. Once the emergency need has been addressed and the offending tooth treated, students are able to offer comprehensive care appointments to patients who initially approached the school for emergency care. By starting the process of new patient intake and establishing a dental home, a future dental emergency may be prevented.

It is important to support dental school emergency clinics due to the extensive services they provide. By investing in advertising for these clinics, patients are more likely to seek care

at a dental clinic instead of their local hospital emergency room when faced with a toothache. As school curriculums evolve to navigate the post-pandemic environment, it is crucial to incorporate emergency clinic rotations for dental students to develop critical diagnostic skills.

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