

SALUTE

A better condition of care

The new Phil and Karen Hunke Special Care Clinic is making dentistry accessible and approachable for special care dental patients and students



MAKING AN INDELIBLE DIFFERENCE

As we embark on another year of growth and innovation at the School of Dentistry, I am proud to reflect on the remarkable achievements and ongoing efforts that define our commitment to excellence in dental education, research and patient care. Our dedicated faculty and staff, whose exceptional work continues to earn national recognition, are the basis of our success.

In this edition of Salute, you will find stories that demonstrate our impact in the classroom and beyond. Whether it's addressing the critical dental shortages across Texas through our outreach programs, or the groundbreaking work at the new Phil and Karen Hunke Special Care Clinic, we are committed to serving diverse communities and advancing the practice of dentistry on a global scale.

We are also excited to introduce you to our two new research centers, where interdisciplinary teams are working tirelessly to solve some of the most pressing challenges in pain management, addiction and regenerative sciences. These initiatives, fueled by collaboration and cutting-edge research, promise to shape the future of dental care and improve patient outcomes for years to come.

I invite you to dive in and discover how our school is making an indelible difference to the profession and in the lives of our students, our patients and the communities we serve. Together, we are shaping the future of dentistry, one breakthrough at a time.

Warmest Regards,

Peter Loomer

Peter M. Loomer, BSc, DDS, PhD, MBA, MRCD(C), FACD
Dean and Professor, School of Dentistry
The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio



SALUTE Contents

14
LOOKING BEYOND OPIOIDS
A new research center positions the School of Dentistry to seek alternative treatments for pain management

20
A BETTER CONDITION OF CARE
A new special care clinic is making dentistry approachable for patients and students

26
ADDRESSING A DENTAL DROUGHT
Outreach, pipelines and mentorship combat professional shortages

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

ACCOLADES
Achievements and awards

4

COMMENCEMENT AND 'WHITE COAT'

Celebrations of academic milestones

6

DEAN'S REPORT

Impacting education, patient care and research

8

'WE MAKE A LIFE BY WHAT WE GIVE'

Alumnus David Yu, DDS, gives back to the school that has been like family

32

IN MEMORIAM

34



30

THE FUTURE OF HEALING IS REGENERATIVE

A new Center for Regenerative Sciences will unite experts across different fields and organizations to bring life-changing therapies to patients



ON THE COVER

In a clinic filled with bubbles and laughter, patients with special conditions find comfort and care tailored to their needs. **See page 20** to discover how the Phil and Karen Hunke Special Care Clinic is changing lives with its innovative approach to dentistry while training future dentists to deliver compassionate, inclusive care.

Cover design by Susan Bolden

ASSOCIATE DEAN OF PATIENT CARE



SCOTT G. STAFFORD, DDS, MBA, was appointed associate dean of patient care on Aug. 1,

2024. Stafford has been a leader in the school for over 22 years, most recently serving as director for professional development and continuing dental education and as interim chair of the Department of Comprehensive Dentistry.

Prior to working full time with the school, Stafford owned and operated four group practice locations in and around San Antonio. He also co-authored and has managed the Dental Practice Readiness Curriculum for the past 19 years to teach dental students management skills and economics related to the profession. The curriculum is used by over a quarter of U.S. dental schools.

After earning his dental degree in 1996, Stafford obtained a master's degree in business administration from Texas Tech University.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC HEALTH DENTISTRY DIRECTOR-AT-LARGE



SOHINI DHAR, DDS, MPH, FICD, assistant professor of comprehensive dentistry, was

elected to serve as a director-at-large on the American Association of Public Health Dentistry's board of directors. The academy's work focuses on improving public oral health by developing and supporting effective programs for oral health promotion and disease prevention.

AMERICAN BOARD OF PERIODONTOLOGY PRESIDENT



ANGELA PALAIOLOGOU GALLIS, DDS, MS, professor of periodontics and director of the Graduate

Program in Periodontics, served as president of the American Board of Periodontology for the 2023–2024 term. She has held several leadership roles within the American Academy of Periodontology and is known for her many contributions to advanced periodontics and patient care. Her research focuses on bone and soft tissue healing, periodontal regeneration and dental implants.

CHRISTUS CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL OUTSTANDING PROFESSIONALISM AWARD



JEFFREY MABRY, DDS, clinical professor of developmental dentistry and

director of the Dental Center for Children at CHRISTUS Children's Hospital in San Antonio, was recognized by the hospital for his demonstration of outstanding professionalism in values, ethics, high-quality patient care and safe practices.

INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE OF DENTISTS FELLOWSHIP



ROCHISHA SINGH MARWAHA, DDS, clinical assistant professor of comprehensive

dentistry and assistant director of the Dental Public Health Residency Program, was inducted as a fellow of the International College of Dentists. This honor recognizes outstanding professional achievement, integrity, meritorious service, leadership and continued progress in the profession of dentistry for the benefit of humankind.

NOBEL BIOCARE BRÅNEMARK OSSEointegration AWARD



DAVID L. COCHRAN, DDS, PhD, MS, MMSc, professor and chair of the Department of Periodontics, was

selected as the 2024 recipient of the Nobel Biocare Brånemark Osseointegration Award. This award, given annually by the Osseointegration Foundation, honors an individual whose impact on implant dentistry is exemplary in the foundation's mission categories: research, education and charitable causes.

TEXAS DENTIST OF THE YEAR



JON M. DOSSETT, DMD, FACD, FICD, MAGD, ABGD, assistant professor in the Department of Comprehensive

Dentistry, was presented with the 2023 Texas Dentist of the Year Award by the Texas Academy of General Dentistry. The honor is given to a dentist whose contributions to the profession, service to the community and dedication to principles of continuing education indicate character and excellence.

UT HEALTH SAN ANTONIO PRESIDENTIAL AWARDS



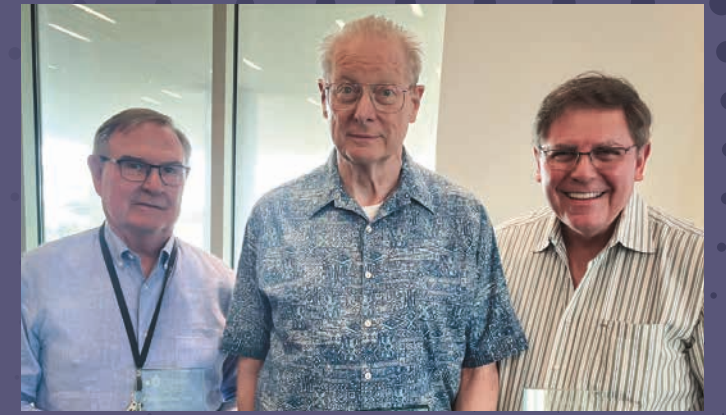
LEA EL HACHEM, DDS, MS, FICD, associate professor of periodontics, was presented with the 2024 Presidential Excellence Award for

Teaching Excellence — Emerging. The honor recognizes faculty with fewer than 10 years of teaching experience who have demonstrated emerging excellence and innovation in teaching.



NIKITA B. RUPAREL, DDS, PhD, MS, associate professor of endodontics and director of the Advanced Education

Program in Endodontics, received the 2024 Presidential Excellence Award for Teaching Excellence — Sustained. Awardees exhibit a depth of pedagogical excellence that has been sustained for 10 or more years and have been nationally recognized for innovative approaches that have been embedded in the educational practice in the discipline.



Left to right: William D. Rose, Edward F. Wright and Joe M. Gutierrez

WE SALUTE YOU

The School of Dentistry salutes three long-serving educators who retired from the Department of Comprehensive Dentistry in 2024.

"Each completed successful careers in the military and then joined the School of Dentistry to selflessly teach young dental professionals. They have influenced thousands of our graduates as well as other faculty members. We are so grateful for their years of dedication," said Scott G. Stafford, DDS, MBA, associate dean of patient care.

William D. Rose, DDS, served the school for 25 years in various leadership roles, including director of the Predoctoral Division and the Advanced Education in General Dentistry program. A Diplomate of the Federal Services Board of General Dentistry and a Master in the Academy of General Dentistry, he has received numerous awards for his teaching excellence and contributions to dentistry.

He is a respected member of multiple dental organizations and has co-authored a chapter in the textbook *Fundamentals of Operative Dentistry*, 3rd edition.

Edward F. Wright, DDS, MS, retired after 21 years as an expert in temporomandibular disorders (TMD). He directed courses and modules on TMD, dental anatomy and occlusion.

Wright's career includes serving as head Air Force dentist for TMD and a two-year dental research fellowship. He has received numerous awards, authored over 90 publications, and co-authored the *Manual of Temporomandibular Disorders*, now in its 4th edition and translated into several languages.

Jose M. Gutierrez III, DDS, MS, served as a dental educator for 20 years. He retired as a clinical associate professor in the Department of Comprehensive Dentistry. An alumnus of the class of 1979, he returned to teach in 2003 after earning his certificate and Master of Science in Prosthodontics in 1995. Gutierrez directed and co-directed various prosthodontics courses and modules.

He had a distinguished career in the U.S. Air Force, serving as a general dental officer and chief prosthodontist, and earned several Meritorious Service medals and Air Force Commendation medals.

Contact the editor at communications@uthscsa.edu to report accolades or to send your story ideas for the next issue of *Salute*.

Class of 2024 *Commencement*

The School of Dentistry celebrated the graduation of 172 dental professionals on May 18, 2024, at the Alamodome. Among the graduates were 107 who earned a Doctor of Dental Surgery degree and 19 who received their Bachelor of Science in Dental Hygiene. Another 46 advanced certificates and master's degrees were also awarded.



Welcome to the *Profession*

With the presentation of their UT Health San Antonio-branded coats, first-year dental and dental hygiene students were formally welcomed into the dental profession during the school's annual ceremony on July 27, 2024. The aspiring professionals were met with applause from esteemed faculty, family and friends who committed to supporting each student through their rigorous training.



We are incredibly proud of our new class and excited about the varying talents and backgrounds they bring.

— Director of Admissions Kelly C. Lemke, DDS, MS

We give you this diploma as a reminder to keep learning, because one day, what you have learned after this diploma will become more important to patients than what you learned before this diploma.

— UT Health San Antonio Acting President Robert Hromas, MD, FACP



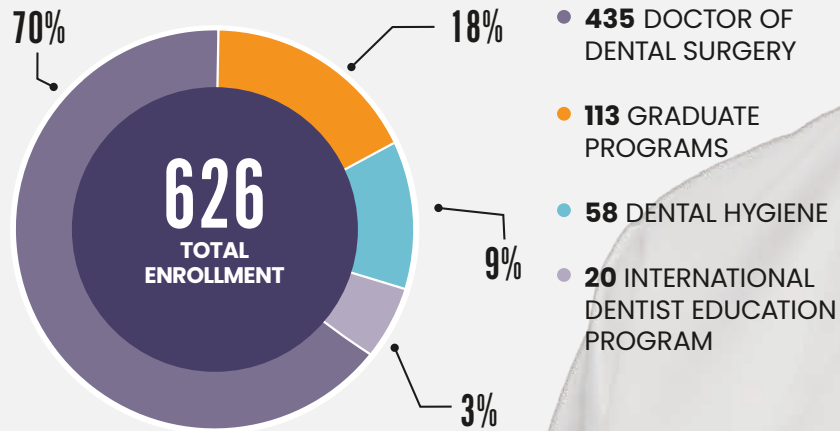
2024 DEAN'S REPORT

EDUCATION

ACADEMIC YEAR 2024-2025

STUDENT POPULATION

TOTAL ENROLLMENT



STUDENT GENDER RATIO



The school is proud of its distinguished educators. **Edward F. Wright**, DDS, MS, is a professor who has dedicated 21 years to shaping future dental professionals. As a course and module director for TMD, dental anatomy and orofacial pain, he and his colleagues have inspired countless students. Wright's commitment to education earned him multiple accolades, including being named Professor of the Year by the sophomore class for multiple years.

AVERAGE ADMISSIONS SCORES PER PROGRAM



2024 ADMISSIONS SEASON

A RECORD-BREAKING YEAR FOR THE DOCTOR OF DENTAL SURGERY CLASS OF 2028

With a record-breaking 1,131 applications received for the 2024 entry year, marking a 13% increase from 2023, the selection process was more rigorous than ever, according to Kelly C. Lemke, DDS, MS, director of admissions. "This surge also included a remarkable 25% increase in applicants from outside Texas," she said.

While it isn't yet clear what drove the uptick, first-year dental student Kate McNeill had an opinion. "I believe there is an increasing interest in dental school, especially at UT Health San Antonio, because of the growing attention on health care and health disparities, particularly in Texas," she said.



GRADUATE CLASS OF 2024



The School of Dentistry's 2024 dental and dental hygiene graduating classes presented well for the American Board of Dental Examiners licensure exams. Doctor of Dental Surgery graduates had a 100% first-time pass rate on the endodontics and prosthodontics components, and a 99% pass rate on the operative component. Dental hygiene graduates achieved a 100% first-time pass rate.

95% of DDS graduates who applied to an advanced education program were accepted into the program of their choice

DEVELOPMENT FISCAL YEAR 2024

\$2,591,153
Overall philanthropy

\$205,400
Scholarships awarded to 65 students

\$37,215
Scholarship funds raised

NOTABLE GIFTS

- **\$250,000** endowment from Laurie L. Bradley
- **\$156,000** from FiteBac Dental and Kirk Kimmerling, DDS, in support of dental biomaterials research
- **\$50,000** in dental equipment from Bien-Air USA, Inc.
- **\$30,000** from Philip H. Hunke, DDS, in support of the Kevin J. Donly, DDS, MS Professorship in Pediatric Dentistry and the UT Health San Antonio President's Council

CLINICAL IMPACT FISCAL YEAR 2024

UT DENTISTRY



121,036

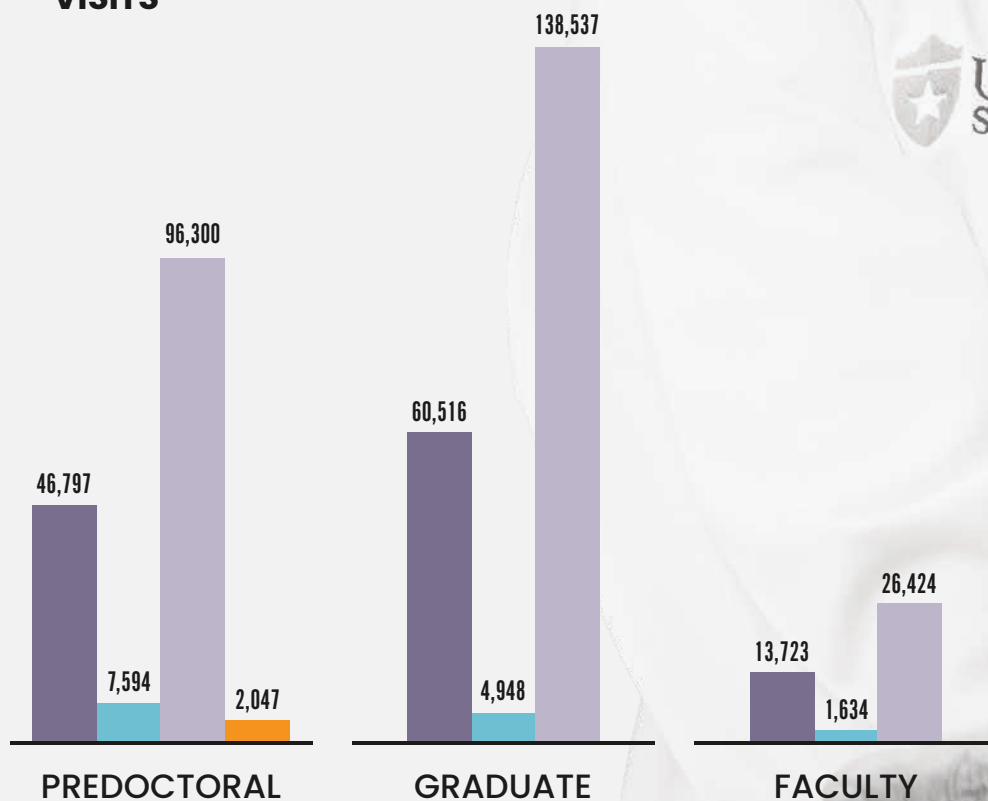
OVERALL TOTAL VISITS



261,261

OVERALL TOTAL PROCEDURES

■ PATIENT VISITS ■ PROCEDURES
■ EMERGENCY VISITS ■ NEW PATIENTS VISITS



UT Dentistry is filled with dedicated providers such as **Adriana Vargas Green, DDS, MPH**, who is a provider in the General Dentistry Clinic. Green specializes in geriatrics, medically compromised patients and hospital dentistry. She provides clinical instruction to Advanced Education in General Dentistry residents and dental students, covering a wide range of procedures from urgent care to complex rehabilitation.

REFERRALS FOR SPECIALTY CARE



1,362

COMMUNITY REFERRALS

Community referrals received from external practices through online referral portal.



12,933

INTERNAL REFERRALS

SURVEY

Rate your experience as a UT Dentistry patient from 1 to 5 with 5 meaning you strongly agree or are strongly satisfied.

4.6 Care met my needs

4.5 I would refer a family member or friend

4.5 Overall satisfaction of my experience

PATIENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

Scores reflect data from 3,564 survey responses collected.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH



18,785

PATIENT VISITS



66,081

PROCEDURES



\$5,361,980

TOTAL VALUE OF UNCOMPENSATED CARE



45

AFFILIATED TRAINING SITES

TOP SERVICES PROVIDED

- DENTAL CLEANINGS
- PREVENTATIVE SERVICES
- EXTRACTIONS AND FILLINGS

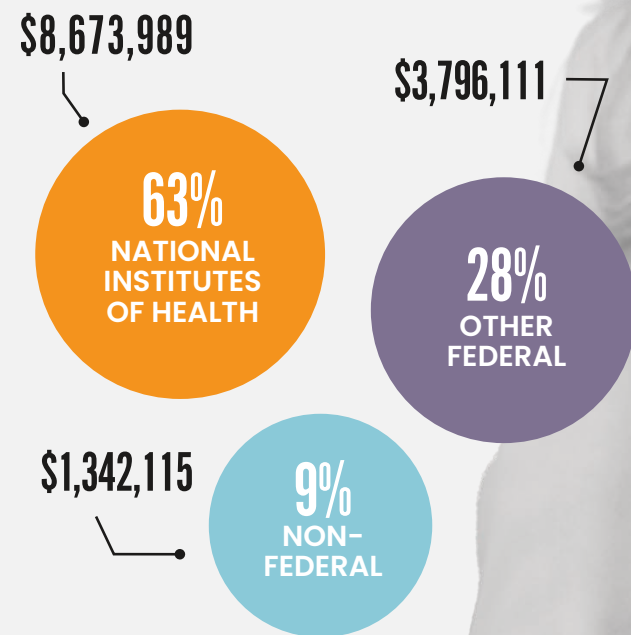
RESEARCH FISCAL YEAR 2024

THE SCHOOL OF DENTISTRY WAS RANKED **NO. 14** IN THE NATION FOR NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR 2023 RESEARCH FUNDING, POSITIONING IT IN THE **TOP 30%** OF ALL ELIGIBLE DENTAL SCHOOLS

SPONSORED PROJECTS

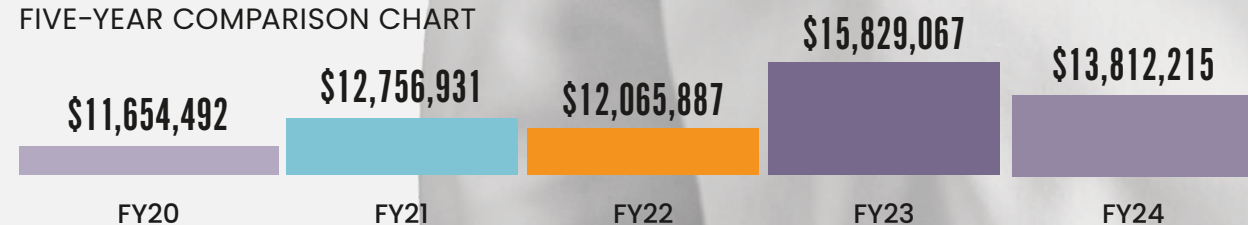
\$13,812,215 TOTAL FUNDING OF ALL GRANTS AND AWARDS

FUNDING SOURCES



Cara Gonzales, DDS, PhD, and her colleagues are on the front lines of dental science. Gonzales focuses on cancer biology, particularly oral cancer and metastasis. Her work explores novel cancer therapies. She has published extensively on topics such as cancer biomarkers, gene expression and tumor biology. Her research aims to improve cancer diagnostics and treatments, with several of her studies making contributions to cancer pain management and oral squamous cell carcinoma treatment.

FIVE-YEAR COMPARISON CHART



88 ACTIVE RESEARCH GRANTS AND AWARDS

76 GRANT PROPOSALS SUBMITTED

SCHOLARSHIP

A study by UT Health San Antonio researchers reveals how obstructive sleep apnea triggers persistent pain through oxygen deprivation and macrophage-related inflammation. Their mouse model demonstrated increased pain sensitivity due to cytokine activity in the nervous system. The findings suggest CPAP usage or targeting macrophages may reduce pain in affected patients.



Primary investigator: **Nathaniel Jeske, PhD**, director of research, Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery

Chivers, S.B. et al. Peripheral macrophages contribute to nociceptor priming in mice with chronic intermittent hypoxia. *Science Signaling*, 17, eadn8936 (2024). DOI: 10.1126/scisignal.adn8936



Primary investigator: **Bennett T. Amaechi, BDS, MSc, PhD, FADI**, professor of cariology, Department of Comprehensive Dentistry

Amaechi, B.T., Farah, R., Liu, J.A. et al. Remineralization of molar incisor hypomineralization (MIH) with a hydroxyapatite toothpaste: an in-situ study. *BDJ Open* 8, 33 (2022). DOI: 10.1038/s41405-022-00126-4

67 TOTAL PUBLICATIONS

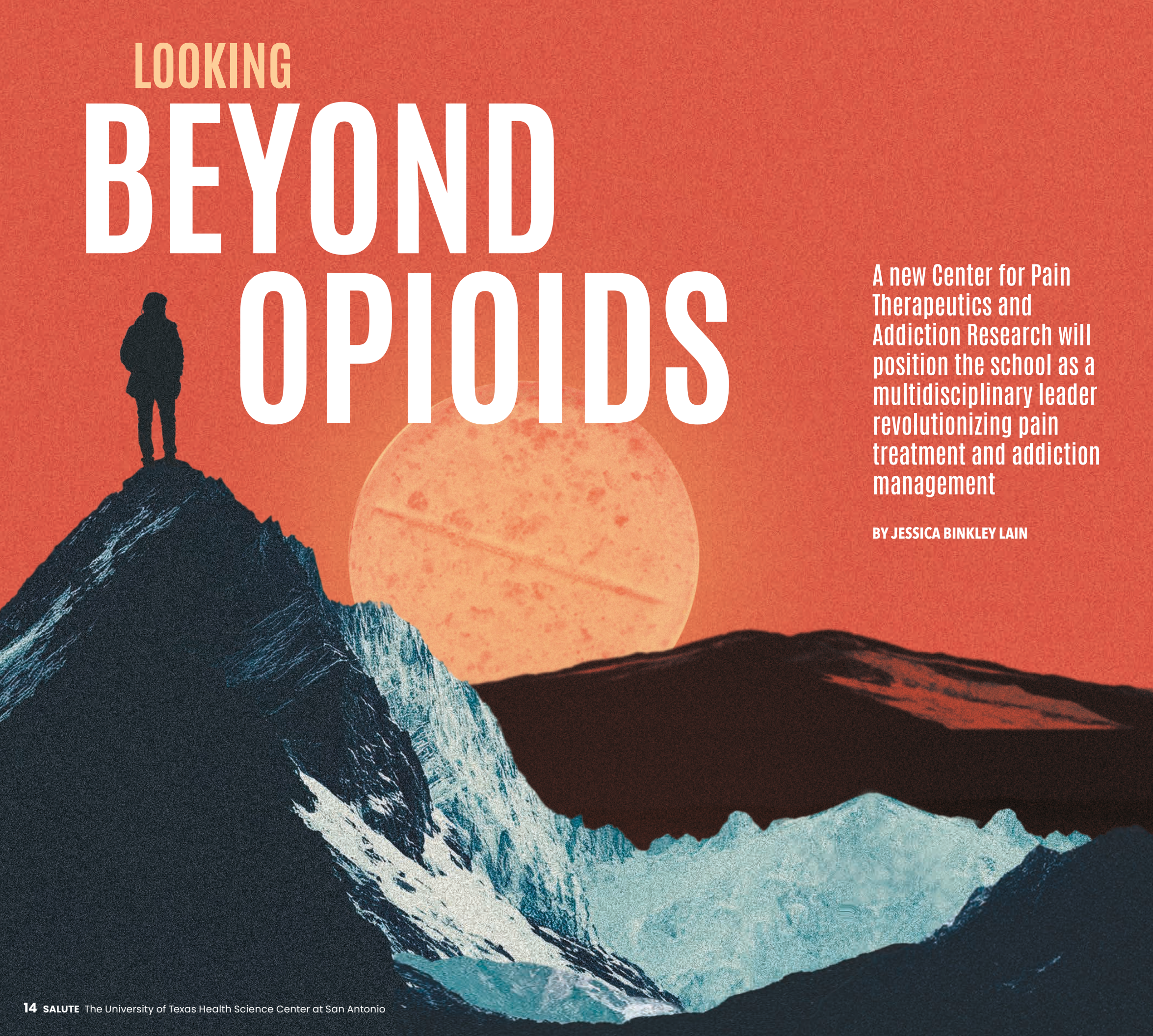
831 TOTAL CITATIONS

68 TOTAL FACULTY ENGAGED IN SCHOLARSHIP

TOP 10 PUBLISHED AUTHORS OVER THE LAST 5 YEARS (8/31/2019–08/31/2024)

RESEARCHER	SCHOLARLY OUTPUT	CITATIONS	H-INDEX	TOTAL H-INDEX
Kenneth Hargreaves, DDS, PhD	74	651	6	70
Anibal Diogenes, DDS, PhD	65	810	10	43
Bennett Amaechi, BDS, PhD, MS	46	399	9	38
Peter Loomer, DDS, PhD, MBA	27	172	8	24
Brij Singh, PhD	25	340	9	45
Armen N. Akopian, PhD	23	488	13	46
David Cochran, DDS, PhD	23	190	8	91
Nikita Ruparel, DDS, PhD, MS	21	722	10	24
Daniel Perez, DDS, MS	20	126	7	16
Mansour M. Zadeh, PhD	20	640	11	44

Data source: Scopus, retrieved Oct. 30, 2024



LOOKING
BEYOND
OPIOIDS

A new Center for Pain Therapeutics and Addiction Research will position the school as a multidisciplinary leader revolutionizing pain treatment and addiction management

BY JESSICA BINKLEY LAIN

Pain management is not a new challenge for dentists. Teeth are composed of some of the most highly innervated tissues in the body, and the mouth is a region vulnerable to infection, so dentists must often contend with extreme patient pain during treatment.

"Dentists have become, by necessity, experts in terms of diagnosing and treating inflammatory pain, so there's a long history in the discipline," said Kenneth Hargreaves, DDS, PhD, professor of endodontics and a world-renowned expert in pain research. "To that end, the School of Dentistry has been advancing pain research to improve pain management for over 20 years."

In an innovative move to put the School of Dentistry's research efforts on the global stage, the school recently launched its Center for Pain Therapeutics and Addiction Research, appointing Hargreaves to serve as the center's inaugural director in August 2024.

The new center brings together experts across disciplines to increase the understanding of the basic mechanisms of pain, as well as to shed light on addiction.

"The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio has long been recognized internationally for its groundbreaking work in addiction and substance use disorder," Hargreaves noted. "We see this new center as a complement to this established expertise of the university and a natural progression of all the research and training efforts our school has been involved in over the years."

The center has members from multiple departments within the dental school and



Kenneth Hargreaves, DDS, PhD, is the inaugural director of the Center for Pain Therapeutics and Addiction Research.

is actively recruiting faculty from across the university. The center already hosts two members from the Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long School of Medicine's Department of Pharmacology, signaling its interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to pain and addiction research.

A major focus of the center is basic science research that will lead to the development of novel, non-opioid analgesics.

Currently, explorations into pain caused from specific conditions, such as temporomandibular joint disorders and oral cancer, aim to understand the underlying mechanisms that contribute to pain and to discover potential targets for future drug development.

Targets for oral cancer pain

"When people think about cancer, they often think of chemotherapy or the disease progression, but cancer pain is its own unique challenge that needs more attention in cancer and pain research," said Shivani Ruparel, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Endodontics.

Ruparel has focused her research career on oral cancer, which she described as being particularly painful. Unlike other cancers such as breast or prostate cancer, which typically only cause pain when metastasized to the bone, oral cancer induces pain as soon as the tumor begins to grow, even when it is small, she explained.

"Patients with oral cancer experience pain from the start, and unfortunately, the main

treatment option is opioids," she said.

This opioid reliance, she noted, presents several issues. Oral cancer patients often develop tolerance to opioids quickly, and there is evidence that opioids can promote cancer progression.

"It's a devastating cycle. Not only do these patients endure pain, but their pain treatments may also be worsening their condition," Ruparel said.

Oral cancer is the sixth most common cancer globally, affecting 400,000 to 600,000 people annually. However, it receives less attention and research funding than cancers like breast and prostate cancer. Moreover, treatment options for oral cancer are successful in only about 50% of cases, Ruparel said.

"These patients are suffering a lot of pain, so we need more research in pain management for these patients, especially into non-opioid treatments," said Ruparel.

She studies how tumors interact with sensory nerves, focusing on where the pain is produced at the site of the tumor. Her team is particularly interested in a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF, and its receptor, TrkB — both of which are highly expressed in oral tumors.

"We discovered that targeting BDNF and TrkB not only slows tumor progression but also reduces pain," Ruparel explained. "This is a huge step forward because it means we can potentially treat the cancer and the pain simultaneously."

Ruparel is excited about the new center, particularly for its promise for discovering non-opioid solutions to pain.

"The opioid crisis has made treating chronic pain even more complex," she noted. "This center is a significant step forward, not just for the School of Dentistry and the university, but for the global pain research community."

Potential of stem cells

Stem cells are another exciting area of research, with a potential for non-opioid analgesic drug development. Among the scientists driving this progress is Nikita Ruparel, MS, DDS, PhD, associate professor and sister to Shivani Ruparel in the Department of Endodontics, and a researcher at the new center. Nikita Ruparel and her team are researching the mechanisms by which stem cells can inhibit oral facial pain.

"Having worked on tissue regeneration with stem cells as a postdoc, I had a great understanding of how stem cells function and what their capabilities are as a therapeutic class," Nikita Ruparel explained. "So, I asked myself, if stem cells are so powerful in modulating the immune response and providing regeneration, why don't we have more literature on their effects on pain management?"

This curiosity led Nikita Ruparel to explore the use of stem cells in treating dental pain, specifically in a condition called apical periodontitis, a common

inflammatory disease caused by tooth infection. By injecting human stem cells into mice with the condition, she and her team found that the pain thresholds in the mice returned to normal following the stem cell injections. This was an exciting discovery, showing that stem cells could significantly impact pain responses, said Nikita Ruparel.

By injecting stem cells into the mouse models, the team was able to observe a complete reversal of pain after 21 days. The tests included assessing sensitivity around the affected area of the mouse's face, as well as tracking the spontaneous pain response through behavioral experiments.

"We found that stem cells actually migrate directly to the site of tooth injury," Nikita Ruparel revealed. This homing mechanism, known as chemotaxis, allows the stem cells to move toward injured tissues that release specific factors, drawing them in. Once there, the stem cells not only aid in tissue repair, but also inhibit pain.

"The factor SDF-1, or stromal-derived factor 1, is six times more present at an injured site compared to healthy tissue," Nikita Ruparel explained. "Stem cells are drawn to these elevated levels of SDF-1, which is why they go directly to the site of injury. This response is something we can mimic without needing to inject stem cells."

One of the factors stem cells release is called

Shivani Ruparel, PhD, seeks safer and more effective pain treatments.





Nikita Ruparel, DDS, PhD, studies the effects of stem cell-released factors to alleviate pain.

macrophage migration inhibitory factor, or MMIF, which inhibits pain neurons, said Nikita Ruparel.

“Our ultimate goal is to take the receptors for MMIF that are present on sensory neurons and use them as drug targets in patients. Instead of injecting stem cells directly into humans, we’re working to create drugs that replicate the effects of the stem cell-released factors to alleviate pain.”

The center also promises to provide students with unparalleled opportunities.

“Having this center will help our students get a more comprehensive experience,” Nikita Ruparel said. “Other scientists within the university will recognize its potential, and we can create a more collaborative environment for mentoring the next generation of pain researchers.”

Simple diet changes

Other investigations at the new center are focused on how the role of secondary factors influence the risk of overall pain throughout the body.

“One of the center’s investigators is looking at the role of hypoxia in pain,” Hargreaves explained, referring to research by Nathaniel Jeske, PhD, director of research for the Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, who recently published a paper showing that

sleep apnea could increase the risk of pain.

“We’re even investigating the role of diet in pain management, exploring how dietary changes, rather than drugs, might influence the development of pain,” Hargreaves said.

For nearly 15 years, Hargreaves and a team of researchers have been studying two classes of lipids — omega-3 and omega-6 — and their role in reducing or increasing the risk of pain in the body.

“You’ve probably heard of the Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes healthy omega-3 lipids and is widely recognized not only for helping with weight loss, but also for promoting heart health and improving metabolic function,” Hargreaves said. “What we’ve discovered is that omega-3 can also help relieve pain. On the other hand, the other class of lipids, omega-6 lipids, we found to be pro-inflammatory. These lipids are found in fried foods, and when your body is filled with omega-6 lipids, it actually leads to a greater pain response after an injury.”

In laboratory studies with diabetic mouse models, Hargreaves and his team found that feeding them a diet heavy in omega-6 lipids made their diabetic pain much worse. However, when fed a healthy omega-3 lipids diet, their diabetic neuropathy was nearly reversed — just by changing their diet.

Recently, Hargreaves received a \$1.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Defense to evaluate the

role of omega-3 lipids in treating diabetic pain and second-degree burn injuries.

“If we can treat these conditions with simple dietary changes, taking a nutraceutical approach instead of a pharmaceutical approach, not only can we improve patients’ quality of life, but we can also avoid the use of opioids,” he said.

Training and policy

In addition to research, education also plays a crucial role in the new center’s mission. Dentists at the predoctoral and graduate levels are being trained in the latest methods for diagnosing and treating pain.

“Our goal is to help dentists counsel patients who might show signs of substance use disorder, providing appropriate referrals to experts for better care,” said Hargreaves. Shaping policy is another goal of the center, particularly around the responsible prescription of opioids.

“The dental school has been at the forefront of developing policies for when and under what conditions to prescribe opioids. While opioids are an important class of drugs, they should not be used in everyday situations,” Hargreaves said. The center advocates for effective pain control without the risks associated with opioid use.

With a focus on cutting-edge research, education and policy, the Center for Pain Therapeutics and Addiction Research is poised to transform how pain and addiction are understood and treated, not just in dentistry but across health care.

“We want to take the university’s motto — ‘We make lives better’ — and make that real,” Hargreaves said. “By advancing our understanding of pain and addiction, we hope to bring tangible improvements to the lives of our patients and the broader community.” ■



CHARTING NEURAL TERRITORY

Mapping neural networks opens a path for non-opioid pain relief

Joint and muscle pain are often cited as contributing factors to opioid use disorders, said Armen Akopian, PhD, professor of endodontics in the School of Dentistry. He is the principal investigator of a study to discover how sensory neurons in the jaw joint and mastication muscles influence and create pain, which could lead to safer drug alternatives to opioid painkillers while helping to curb addiction.

“This effort is the basis for eventually developing drugs to replace opioids, so that when someone goes to the dentist with severe jaw joint and facial muscle pain, they will no longer have just one option to control it,” he said.

Akopian and his team are creating 3D maps of the different types of sensory neurons found in the temporomandibular joint and mastication muscle, better known as the jaw joint structures. In doing so, they will seek to better understand how nerves are distributed, or innervated, throughout the different tissues of the joint. That information, in turn, is expected to be used to develop novel, more precise therapies for reducing joint pain and deterioration as well as restore healthy joints.

There will also be a focus on understanding how these types and patterns of sensory and sympathetic neuron networks in joints change with disease and aging, and how they differ between individuals depending on age, sex or disease, said Akopian. Understanding and mapping the innervation of joints is an important first step toward developing targeted therapies that can help reduce and potentially eliminate opioid dependency.





Brian Guerra (left) and Scarlett Farrell (right), patients of the Hunke Special Care Clinic, enjoy playing in front of the clinic's bubble wall, which creates a soothing and tranquil atmosphere.

BY KRISTEN ZAPATA

A better condition of care

The new Phil and Karen Hunke Special Care Clinic is making dentistry accessible and approachable for special care dental patients and students

“Hablo Español muy bien,” said Jennifer Farrell, DDS, DABSCD, with a satisfied smile. As a middle schooler growing up in Massachusetts, Farrell’s parents were told she would struggle in school, never be capable of attending college and certainly never learn a foreign language, which she desperately wanted to do.

“I am the product of special education,” Farrell announced proudly. As a child, she had a hearing condition that doctors didn’t believe required hearing aids. At school, she was given the accommodation of sitting in the middle of the classroom so the sound of her teacher’s voice could bounce off the walls to amplify it.

“Even then, I just wasn’t doing so well in school,” she said. “I would always look at my classmates and think, I want to be smart like them.”

To keep up with her peers, Farrell would attend tutoring and be assigned double the work. She was finally given clearance to enroll in a Spanish course.

“They didn’t think I could handle it, but my mother was always in my corner,” Farrell said.

As it turned out, she handled the course quite well, went on to graduate from college and then earned a dental degree from Northwestern University Dental School.

She did a preceptorship in special patient care dentistry and completed a residency program in dental anesthesiology at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center in Chicago, where she subsequently directed the Special Patient Care Dental Program for 13 years. →

"I had to work really, really hard, but I'm always up for a good challenge, so here I am," said Farrell, who today is the founding director of the Phil and Karen Hunke Special Care Clinic at UT Health San Antonio's School of Dentistry.

Indeed, with over 28 years of special patient care experience, Farrell is ready to make a difference in South Texas.

"Speaking Spanish comes in handy in these parts," she said.

The challenge

The School of Dentistry celebrated the opening of its special care clinic with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Feb. 7, 2024. The clinic, named for the San Antonio-area philanthropists

who provided seed money for the space renovation, provides comprehensive dental care for adults and children with intellectual, developmental, cognitive or physical disabilities and those with complex medical conditions.

"There really isn't a whole lot of difference between treating these folks and the general population," Farrell said. "The biggest differentiator would be chairside manner, 100%."

Farrell should know. She has the unique perspective of being a dental provider and mother to four children, each with unique challenges.

"I'm facing the exact same challenge that my patients face. It's not just with dental care but all health care," she said.

The challenge Farrell and other caregivers face is access to health providers experienced and willing to treat their loved ones in need of accommodations for care.

According to a report by the National Council on Disability, due to a lack of training, "dental care is often more difficult to find than any other type of service for people with [intellectual and developmental disabilities]." Because of this, the council stated that this patient population is less likely to have had their teeth cleaned in the past five years or at all compared to those who are not considered disabled.

These findings resulted in the council making a recommendation to the Commission on Dental Accreditation (CODA) to require all U.S. dental schools to ensure

their students receive proper training to manage the treatment of patients with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

In 2019, CODA passed the decision to require schools to update their curricula to be inclusive of special care patients in the predoctoral dental, orthodontics, dental hygiene and dental assistant programs. The American Dental Association likewise updated its Code of Professional Conduct to read, "dentists shall not refuse to accept patients into their practice or deny dental service to patients because of the patient's... disability."

"Dentists will no longer be able to refer these patients out without first attempting to treat them," Farrell said.

The reason

Martin Nutt is already a regular in Farrell's dental chair, with a plan for a full dental restoration — from fillings to extractions to a lower partial denture. During his visits, he enjoys watching NASCAR races as the dental team does its work.

"I love it here," he said. "It's like *Cheers*. You walk in, and it's like, 'Hey, Norm!' Everyone knows your name," he said, referencing the 1980s sitcom by the same name.

Nutt has a complex medical history that includes a brain tumor at the tender age of nine, a malignant jaw mass at age 14 and a stroke at 40. In speaking with him, one might wonder why he would need care at a special patient clinic. Besides some irregularity in the shape of his jawline and

a slight speech impediment, Nutt doesn't seem like a patient who would have trouble being seen at any dental office.

For Farrell, this is exactly why dental students need exposure to the special patient population.

"Honestly, there are many patients who have disabilities who can be seen in the regular dental office. Unfortunately, many clinicians make assumptions about these individuals based on the way that they present rather than attempting care to see if they can tolerate it," she said.

"To the defense of referring clinicians, I can understand their trepidation, as very few, including myself, were trained to provide care to these folks while in dental school," Farrell added.

The solution

Third-year dental student Gabby Ward has begun the clinical portion of her dental curriculum in earnest. As an aspiring pediatric dentist, Ward values the opportunity she has to interact with patients like Martin Nutt.

"Pediatric and special needs dentistry work hand in hand," she said. "More often than not, kids with special needs are sent to a specialist because their general dentist is just not equipped to treat them."

In addition to a didactic course introducing them to special care dentistry, Ward and her classmates will each be assigned a one-week rotation through the special needs clinic. Each day starts and ends with a clinic huddle to discuss the patients,



"I'M FACING THE EXACT SAME CHALLENGE THAT MY PATIENTS FACE. IT'S NOT JUST WITH DENTAL CARE BUT ALL HEALTH CARE."

— JENNIFER FARRELL, DDS, DABSCD

their conditions and treatment. "We talk about what they may encounter or things they should think of in terms of developing a treatment plan for a particular person," Farrell said. "We also anticipate challenges we might have during an appointment and discuss how we would navigate those."

The students are then ready to interact with their patients. Working in groups of three or four, Farrell has her students alternate tasks such as charting and assisting with or conducting the dental treatment. →



Sebastian Tamez (far left) is flanked by his parents as he greets Jennifer Farrell, DDS, for his appointment. Tamez, who is on the autism spectrum, had never experienced dental care that fully accommodated his needs until he met Farrell.

Ward will officially rotate through the clinic later this term and again in her fourth year, but she has been volunteering in the clinic in her free time since it opened. She shadows Farrell, charts, helps with X-rays or with more important tasks for patients, such as blowing up balloons, hitting the skip button on YouTube video ads or bringing them popsicles.

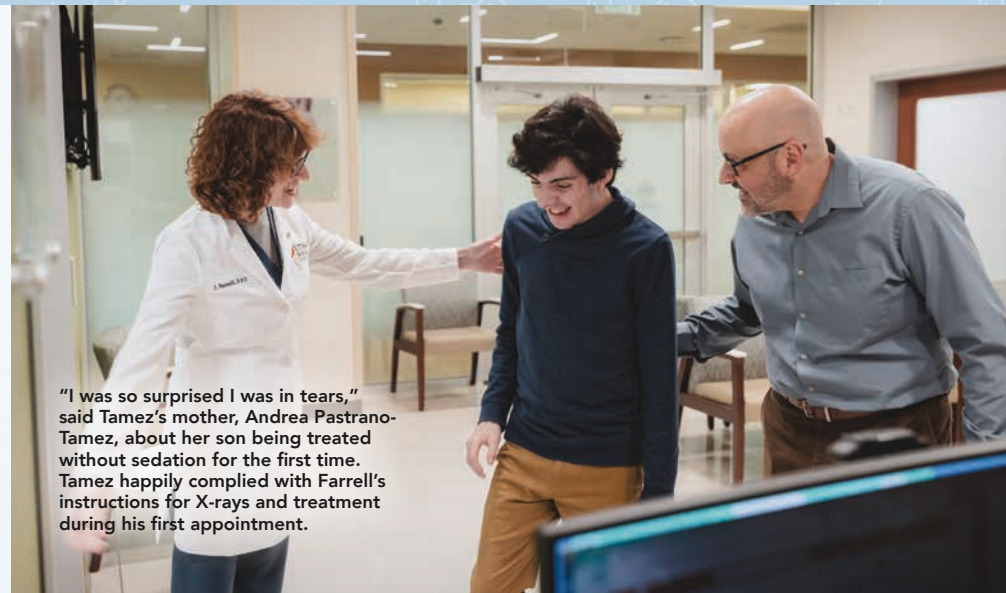
Since spending time in the clinic, Ward said she came to an important conclusion about special patient dentistry.

"It runs just like any dental visit would," she said. "It may run a bit slower. You need a little patience to explain everything and make the patient comfortable, but Dr. Farrell treats it just like any other dental visit."

One particular visit made quite an impression on Ward.

"We had one patient who was so scared when he arrived. His mom said that he hadn't sat for a cleaning in 10 or 15 years," Ward said. "The mom was ready to give up on finding a dentist, but she knew her son had cavities and other things wrong. By the end of it, we got X-rays, he sat for a cleaning and we've even done extractions on him! His mom was crying because she was so happy."

The trick, according to Ward, is finding a way to make dentistry approachable by taking the time to explain every step along the way. "Everyone deserves access to care," she said. "I'm glad I get exposure to these patients now, so when I graduate, I feel confident with any patient."



"I was so surprised I was in tears," said Tamez's mother, Andrea Pastrano-Tamez, about her son being treated without sedation for the first time. Tamez happily complied with Farrell's instructions for X-rays and treatment during his first appointment.

The future

Farrell is passionate about sharing her expertise with her students but is just as eager to share it with dental professionals who need strategies for treating special care patients.

"We are developing continuing education courses aimed at educating practicing providers because we're a collaborative team, we should all be working together," she said.

She is also looking forward to working more collaboratively with local community partners, like The Arc, a national community-based organization that advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, which held a desensitization event at the clinic in September 2024 to help take some of the mystery out of the dental office.

"Potential patients and their families were invited to come see, touch and feel the dental equipment. They could sit and try out the dental chair and talk with me and some of our students," Farrell said.

The School of Dentistry will, in the future, explore areas of research or scholarship within the special care clinic, such as treatment models that are seen as being most effective. Before that type of work begins, Farrell is solely focused on building relationships and trust with her patients and their families.

'A huge bite'

"I like to tell my students that if every dentist in the U.S. saw even one patient with a disability, we could take a huge bite out of the access to care issue for that population," Farrell said. ■

To learn more about the clinic or how to schedule an appointment, visit UTDentistry.org/SpecialCare or call 210-567-3783. Providers can refer patients through the online referral portal at uthscsa.edu/dentistry-referral-system/.

ACCOMMODATING PATIENTS WITH AUTISM

By understanding the way in which an individual with autism experiences the world, dental providers can easily adapt their approach to care

Autism spectrum disorder is a complex neurodevelopmental condition that presents unique challenges, particularly in settings like dental offices, where a patient's normal routines are disrupted and sensory inputs are heightened. For dental professionals, understanding the needs of autistic patients is crucial for providing effective care and a positive experience.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is characterized by persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests and repetitive behaviors. The disorder is a spectrum, meaning the degree of impairment varies greatly between individuals. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, approximately 1 in 36 children have been identified with autism, and adults with the disorder often struggle to access dental care due to a lack of training among providers and their general uneasiness in treating this population.

TIPS FOR TREATMENT

1 Emphasize routine. Patients with autism thrive on routine. Changes to their daily schedule, such as dental appointments, can cause significant distress. Be aware that their discomfort may stem from the disruption of their routine rather than fear of dental procedures.

2 Use visual aids. Visual aids like pictograms can help autistic patients understand what to expect during their visit. These tools make communication clearer and more consistent, which can reduce anxiety and improve cooperation.

3 Create a comfortable environment. Sensory overload is a common issue for autistic patients. Dimming the lights, providing noise-canceling headphones and minimizing sudden changes in the environment can help make the experience less overwhelming.

4 Incorporate breaks. Frequent, fun breaks can alleviate stress for both the patient and the provider. Consider activities like dancing or playing with a foam ball to lighten the mood and provide a welcome distraction.

5 Offer positive reinforcement. Reward positive behavior during the visit, but only when it's genuinely earned. Consistent and meaningful rewards encourage good behavior in future visits.

6 Communicate simply and gently. When a patient is distressed, verbalize what you believe they might be feeling in simple terms. This acknowledgment can make them feel understood and help de-escalate intense emotions. Offer to let them rip up a piece of paper if it will help them express their emotions.

7 Be flexible. Some autistic patients may be more comfortable being treated outside the traditional dental chair. If they prefer a different location in the office, accommodate them to the best of your ability.

8 Understand behavior as communication. Many autistic individuals may lack the verbal skills to express discomfort, so their behavior often serves as their primary mode of communication. Recognize that what might appear as resistance is often a form of expressing an unmet need.

By adopting these strategies, dental professionals can create a more welcoming and effective environment for those with neurodevelopmental conditions, ultimately improving their access to quality dental care and their overall experience at the dentist's office.

This information was presented during the Dental Education Network for Texas ECHO session on March 21, 2024, by Jennifer Farrell, DDS, DABSCD. Watch the entire lecture and a case study at uthscsa.edu/echo/dent/.

The Phil and Karen Hunke Special Care Clinic

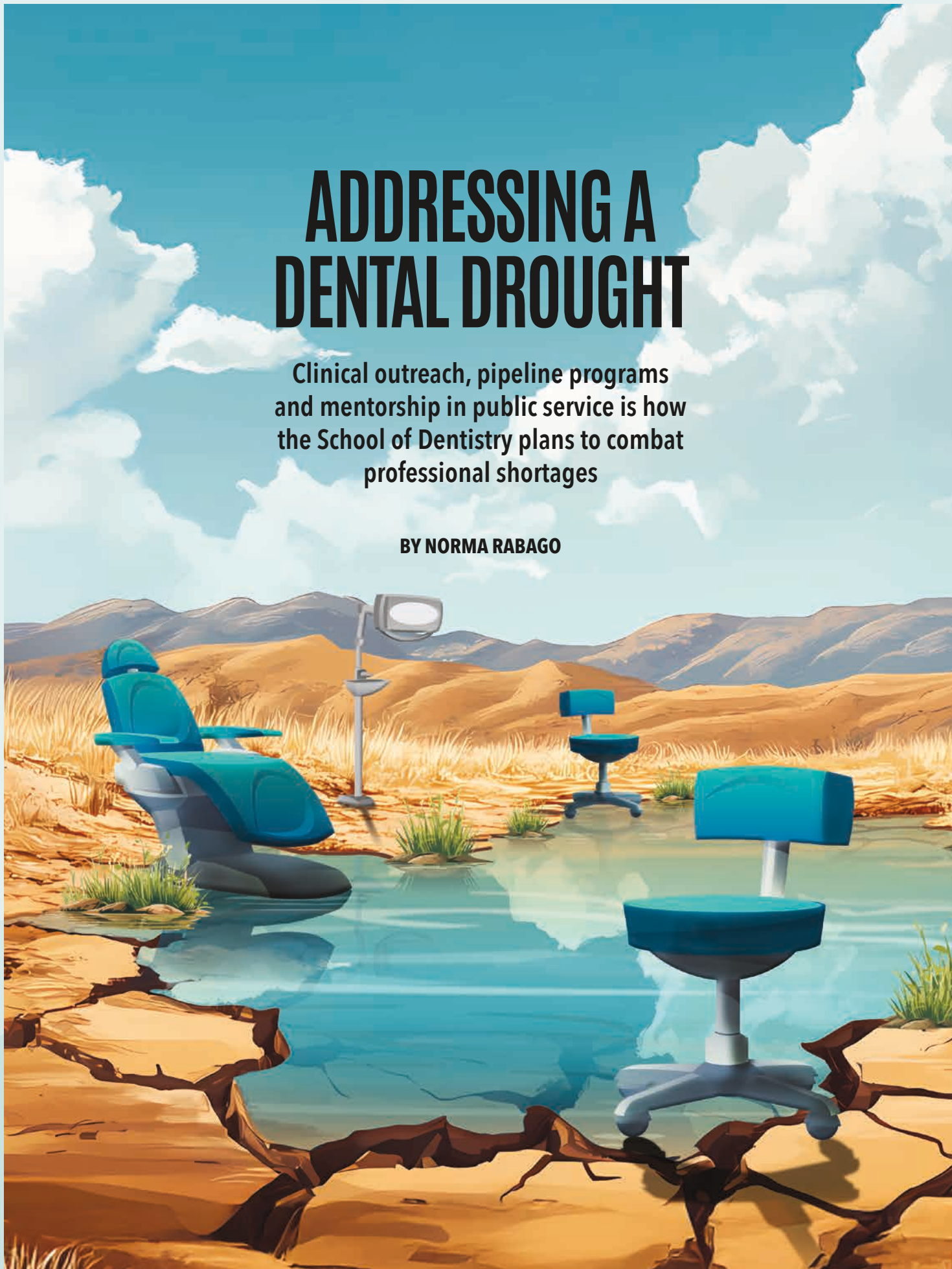
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- 12 private treatment rooms allow the full range of traditional dental services in one location.
- Five treatment rooms are equipped to deliver conscious sedation, a technique of administering a combination of medications to relax a patient and block pain while they remain aware and responsive.
- Wheelchair accommodations provide access throughout the clinic.
- Features such as a multi-sensory room and bubble wall, a color-changing water feature that emits bubbles, reduce patients' anxiety by helping them engage and relax.

ADDRESSING A DENTAL DROUGHT

Clinical outreach, pipeline programs and mentorship in public service is how the School of Dentistry plans to combat professional shortages

BY NORMA RABAGO



“WE SEND THE STUDENTS ON ROTATIONS SO THEY CAN UNDERSTAND THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE.”

**— JUANITA LOZANO-PINEDA
DDS, MPH**

In a 2024 report, the Health Resources Services Administration designated 256 Texas communities as dental professional shortage areas with few, if any, dental professionals. These areas often struggle with limited access to care, resulting in longer wait times

for appointments, travel challenges for patients and an overall gap in preventative and restorative care — by all accounts, dental deserts.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the state’s population has surpassed 30 million and is the fourth fastest-growing state in the country. And while most of the state’s population lives in urban areas, well over 4 million Texans live in rural communities where health care providers are at a minimum.

In sparsely populated rural communities, the need for more patients contributes to the lack of local providers, said Juanita Lozano-Pineda, DDS, MPH, associate dean for external affairs and director of the UT Health San Antonio School of Dentistry’s Hispanic Center of Excellence.

And in poor urban areas, many adults lack dental insurance, resulting in fewer dental practices where they are critically needed.

Lozano-Pineda believes student recruitment is

important to addressing the needs of these locations.

“We recruit students from those areas and make sure we consider all students, especially those from rural areas, because we know [they] need more dentists,” she said.

Since 1985, the school has conducted clinical rotations at community health clinics in San Antonio, the Rio Grande Valley and Laredo to combat the dental shortage among lower-income patients. Recently, the school expanded its reach to Luling and Seguin.

Lozano-Pineda said the rotations, while serving as a training ground for students, may also spark a future interest.

“We send the students on rotations so they can understand the communities we serve, but they may see themselves choosing to practice there because that community really needs a dentist,” she said. “If they are from the community, they definitely understand the tremendous need.”

The school’s dental students are seeing more than 36,000 patients annually through community clinics in South Texas, resulting in approximately \$5 million of uncompensated care. →



Juanita Lozano-Pineda,
DDS, MPH

A career to mimic

Christina Meiners, DDS, FICD, director of community learning, grew up in Weslaco with dreams of being a medical doctor. Her mother was a nurse, so she chose pre-med during her undergraduate years.

"It wasn't until I got braces that I realized that being a dentist is being a doctor. I thought, 'Oh, there's an opportunity there,'" she said. "Growing up, I didn't see very many Hispanic physicians or many female doctors even though I lived in the Rio Grande Valley where it's 95% Hispanic.

So, the ones delivering the care didn't reflect the population [they] served.

That's what we're hoping to change."

Meiners' journey is a path she hopes many students will mimic.

"When I graduated, I served in the same community health care center that we rotated through as students," said Meiners. She

Christina Meiners, DDS, FICD

ended up staying for 11 years.

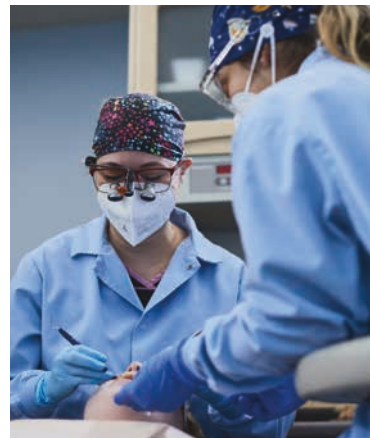
The rotations give students a chance to connect with communities they might not have encountered before. They also introduce the profession to a legion of future dentists. Meiners explained that students and faculty deliver presentations to children in elementary schools not only to teach the value of good oral hygiene, but also the benefits of a career in dentistry.

"At the beginning of our presentation, we ask them how many want to be a dentist, and a few hands go up. [Then] we dress them up in little lab coats and tell them how we get to play with little water guns every day. After the presentation, we asked how many would consider becoming dentists, and all their hands went up. It's just planting a seed and hopefully making their next visit to the dentist a more curious experience," Meiners said.

A pipeline

Introducing the profession of dentistry to elementary-age children in fun and engaging school visits is just one way School of Dentistry is working to address a projected shortage of dental professionals across the state.

Presentations to high school and college students are part of the Building



Christina Meiners was a dedicated community dentist for 11 years.

our Leaders in Dentistry program, known as BOLD. Students learn about dental careers through workshops conducted across the state.

Pre-dental students working on their undergraduate degrees can apply for the Learning Enhancement for Achievement in Dentistry (LEAD) program. The three-week competitive summer program offers mini-courses in the sciences and hands-on dental workshops. Participants can continue in the program after graduation and upon acceptance into the School of Dentistry.

"We guide and mentor some of these students from underserved areas so they can be competitive applicants to dental schools," Lozano-Pineda said. "Our hope is that some of these individuals we recruit from underserved areas will go back to those underserved areas and help their communities."

Since 2014, 200 students have participated in the LEAD program. Of those, 122 applied to dental school and 78 have been accepted. Notably, 40% of practicing dentists in South Texas graduated from UT Health San Antonio's School of Dentistry.

Part of the family

At The University of Texas Education and Research Center at Laredo, clinical rotations help some students step outside their comfort zones and learn the benefits of working in smaller communities.

"I tell students they will become part of their patient's family and help them see how fulfilling it is to work in an area where maybe there are not many dental providers," said Magda de la Torre, Dental Hygiene Program director. "Some students are a little hesitant to visit some of our underserved communities, but they come back to the classroom happy with the realization that a patient is a patient regardless of where they live, what language they speak or what their culture may be." ■



Magda de la Torre, MPH, RDH

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." – Gandhi

The call to help others

By Christina Meiners, DDS, FICD

As a little girl, I remember loading our van full of school supplies, clothes and toys several times a year, traveling to Mexico, visiting family and distributing everything we brought to them and others in surrounding communities. These memories I will always treasure, as they helped me discover that I was happiest when helping put smiles on others' faces.

Fast forward to my pre-dental years in college when I learned about the Christian Medical and Dental Associations and quickly joined their mission trips across the border. From the moment I served chairside as a professional hand-holder and translator, I was hooked. I knew I wanted to do dentistry, and this was the population I wanted to serve.

As a dental student, I signed up for every community outreach selective I could and looked forward to my South Texas rotations. Some of the best memories I had in dental school were working with promotoras (Spanish for community health workers) and the Sisters of Mercy in Laredo, the homeless population at San Antonio Christian Dental Clinic and my hometown residents at Su Clinica in the Rio Grande Valley, and discovering a high need right in San Antonio at CommuniCare, a federally qualified health center.

My rotation at CommuniCare impacted me so much that I left my information to contact me as soon as there was an opening. I was fortunate to work there for 11 years as a staff dentist and adjunct faculty, overseeing the university's dental students on their rotations.

The many opportunities to serve the vulnerable populations of South Texas outside of the dental school and the amazing mentors it connected me with — including Vidal Balderas, DDS, MPH, associate professor of comprehensive dentistry, and Juanita Lozano-Pineda, DDS, MPH, associate dean for external affairs — made my dental school experience one that I truly appreciated and reinforced my passion for public health and service to the community.

When the opportunity arose to work alongside my mentors to support and oversee the very programs that had such an impact on me, I didn't hesitate to return. In this new role, I hope to use my experience to strengthen our outreach programs and their impact on students and to inspire more students to find their calling as service-oriented oral health providers.

Christina Meiners, DDS, FICD, serves as the director of community education at UT Health San Antonio's School of Dentistry. She received her Doctor of Dental Surgery degree from the university in 2010.

THE FUTURE OF HEALING IS REGENERATIVE

A NEW CENTER FOR REGENERATIVE SCIENCES WILL UNITE EXPERTS ACROSS DIFFERENT FIELDS AND ORGANIZATIONS TO BRING LIFE-CHANGING THERAPIES TO PATIENTS

BY ORITH FARAGO



For many suffering from oral diseases, research that leads to new therapies can be life-changing.

This includes those with salivary glands that aren't functioning well after undergoing radiation for head or neck cancer, making it hard

to perform everyday functions like chewing and swallowing. Lack of saliva can also cause bad breath, keeping patients from engaging in social activities and lowering their quality of life.

With the recent launch of the School of Dentistry's Center for Regenerative Sciences, research to find potential regenerative

therapies to improve the function of salivary glands and other ailments of the mouth can be brought to new clinical trials and potentially provide relief for many patients.

The new center leverages interdisciplinary collaboration from experts across UT Health San Antonio and the region to

encourage research that can translate into clinical applications and position the university at the forefront of regenerative dentistry and medicine.

"We have engaged with other research experts from the Sam and Ann Barshop Institute for Longevity and Aging Studies, the Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long School of Medicine and the Southwest National Primate Research Center to build up very broad connections," said Xiao-Dong Chen, MD, PhD, professor in the Department of Comprehensive Dentistry. It was Chen's vision to create the center to bring experts together from various fields to leverage their unique expertise.

The center has three areas of primary focus, including:

1. Development of regenerative medicine strategies based on the use of stem cells that have been primed by a culture on a tissue-specific microenvironment or environment such as bone, cartilage or nerve.
2. Regeneration of salivary glands that have been destroyed by radiation therapy for head and neck cancer or autoimmune diseases, such as Sjögren's syndrome, a systemic autoimmune disease that affects the entire body with symptoms of extensive dryness and other complications including fatigue, chronic pain, major organ involvement, neuropathies and lymphomas, according to the Sjögren's Foundation.
3. Fabrication of 3D-printed scaffolds that replicate



Xiao-Dong Chen, MD, PhD, holder of the Castella Distinguished Professorship Endowment.

skeletal bone structure and function, such as bone grafts for reconstructing craniofacial defects or manufacturing large quantities of bone marrow cells for advanced stem cell-based therapies.

How research could impact patients

According to the results of a study published in *Stem Cell Research & Therapy* in 2022, Chen and his colleagues posited the feasibility of using stem cells to treat hypofunctioning salivary glands and restoring the production of saliva in patients. After the findings were released, hopeful patients wrote letters to Chen, anxious to learn more about how the study could translate into potential therapeutics for them.

Chen said it was difficult for him to read about the suffering these patients endured from the lack of saliva. It was even more

difficult to let them know that he and his colleagues still have a long way to go to prove their concept and translate their findings into clinical applications.

For Chen, receiving those letters reaffirmed the importance of the center's mission to bring experts together to support collaborative research that can ultimately be translated into meaningful therapeutics for patients.

Chen hopes that with the support of the center, he and his colleagues can take the salivary gland research to the next level by conducting further research and an early clinical trial. ■

Brij B. Singh, PhD, associate dean for research, was appointed interim director of the Center for Regenerative Sciences when the center launched in August 2024. Recruitment for the inaugural director is underway.

ALUMNUS
DAVID YU, DDS, MS,
GIVES BACK TO THE
ALMA MATER THAT HAS
BEEN LIKE FAMILY OVER
THE YEARS

‘WE
MAKE A
LIFE BY
WHAT WE
GIVE’

BY ORITH FARAGO



ABOVE: David Yu, DDS, MS, in his Austin-based periodontal practice Periodontal Surgical Arts.

RIGHT: David Yu with his wife, Wendy, son, Kevin, and daughter, Katelyn, in front of The University of Texas at Austin's historic tower. Both of Yu's children attend The University of Texas at Austin, where Kevin is majoring in mechanical engineering and Katelyn is a pre-dental biology major.

Twenty-plus years after his School of Dentistry residency, alumnus David Yu, DDS, MS, still feels comfortable calling any of the school's seasoned faculty for advice.

"They pick up the phone like it was just yesterday [when] I graduated," Yu said. "The thing about UT Health San Antonio is that it's almost [as if] you're always part of that family."

Like any family, being engaged and supportive is important, and Yu has taken this concept to heart by giving back to the school and to the profession that have been there for him through the years. He has supported the School of Dentistry's Advanced Education in General Dentistry program and its periodontology residency. He is also passionate about the work of the American Academy of Periodontology Foundation, where he serves as a director.

"Being able to support those programs that have given so much to me is an honor," Yu said. "They train new doctors to the highest level in order for them to meet and exceed the standards of care for their patients."

In addition, Yu speaks in the school's Practice Management Course and invites residents to his Austin-based periodontal practice — Periodontal Surgical Arts — for hands-on teaching, according to Yu's mentor of more than 20 years, Brian Mealey, DDS, MS, clinical professor of periodontics.

"David will do this for anyone," Mealey said, adding that Yu's giving spirit is matched by his calm, gentle demeanor and his inspiring leadership.

A leader in the making

After earning his dental degree from Indiana University School of Dentistry, Yu chose to do his specialty training at UT Health San Antonio because of its well-trained faculty and the breadth of learning that residents receive.

"The facilities, the attending [faculty], the support was clearly unequaled compared to the other programs that I looked at," Yu said. "I knew it was the only place that I belonged once I met everyone there."

During his hospital-based general practice residency in the late 1990s, Yu participated in



shifts at University Hospital and the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Veterans' Hospital, where the residents learned medicine and more advanced procedures, including intravenous sedation. After that, he received his master's degree from the university's Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and obtained multiple certifications in his field before practicing in Dallas and later starting his own Austin practice in 2003.

During his professional career, Yu has been a member and served on the boards of many dental organizations. He was appointed to the Texas State Board of Dental Examiners, where Yu's methodical and fair approach resulted in his appointment as the dental board's chair by Gov. Greg Abbott in 2021, Mealey said.

"[Gov. Abbott] saw David's ability to work across opinion lines to get the job done — not for one group or another — but for all of the patients in Texas," Mealey said. "Gov. Abbott could not have picked a better person for the job."

Giving back as a way of life

Now, as a successful periodontal surgical practitioner, Yu welcomes the opportunity to give back and is happy to lend advice to the family of dental students and alumni from his alma mater.

His best advice: Earning a doctorate may open the door to greater opportunities, but in the end, it's about finding ways to give back.

"I love the quote from Sir Winston Churchill, 'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give,'" Yu said. ■

In Memoriam



MICHAEL T. POTTER

Michael "Mike" T. Potter, DDS, MS, died July 10, 2024, after battling progressive supranuclear palsy, a rare neurodegenerative condition. Potter was a board-certified prosthodontist who served 30 years in the U.S. Air Force, retiring at the rank of colonel.

After leaving the military, Potter continued his career with a geriatric fellowship at Audie L. Murphy Memorial Veterans' Hospital and went into private practice. Potter joined the faculty at the School of Dentistry as a clinical associate professor teaching prosthodontics to dental students for over 17 years.

Potter earned his Doctor of Dental Surgery degree from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and completed a residency in prosthodontics at Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgical Center, formerly known as Wilford Hall Medical Center, at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.



GLENN R. WALTERS

Glenn R. Walters, DDS, died Aug. 23, 2024, at the age of 88. Walters, known as the founding father of the endodontics department, had trained every dental student in the school's doctoral program from 1971 to his retirement in 2020. During those 49 years, the associate professor of endodontics primarily worked with predoctoral students as a lecturer and lab coordinator and covered the predoctoral clinic.

Walters began his dental career as a dental assistant while in the U.S. Air Force. He then received his dental degree from The University of Texas Dental Branch at Houston in 1966. During his acceptance of the American Association of Endodontists' Calvin D. Torneck Part-Time Educator Award in 2019, Walters credited the success of his career to Carol, his beloved wife of more than 63 years.

Walters began his dental career as a dental assistant while in the U.S. Air Force. He then received his dental degree from The University of Texas Dental Branch at Houston in 1966. During his acceptance of the American Association of Endodontists' Calvin D. Torneck Part-Time Educator Award in 2019, Walters credited the success of his career to Carol, his beloved wife of more than 63 years.



Potter and Walters left a lasting imprint on the School of Dentistry. Known for their signature cowboy boots, the iconic footwear is now a symbol of their rugged determination and dedicated contributions to the dental community.

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with compassionate
commitment.

Learn how our dental care outreach programs impact children's health across South Texas at EverythingItTakes.org/Contreras.

Professor, researcher, pediatric dentist and family advocate Claudia Contreras, DDS, lives by the motto, "I will serve." She mentors students with her positivity and passion — and her impact is also seen in her innovations of digital dental scans and sedation techniques that minimize children's discomfort. Dr. Contreras leads the effort to bring dental care to families in rural and underserved communities, contributing to our 18,000 outreach visits completed each year across South Texas.

As she devotes her talent and energy to make lives better, Dr. Contreras constantly pushes forward, giving everything it takes.



EVERYTHING IT TAKESSM

Learn more about
dental care for
children in Texas

