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Alternative Clinical Activities in the Care of Adults with Developmental and Acquired Disabilities

Adults with developmental and acquired disabilities frequently have difficulty accessing dental care. Training dental students in treating this population is essential to improving access to care. This care is often complex, and an existing spiral curriculum at UW School of Dentistry (UWSOD) in this area was disrupted by COVID-19 clinical restrictions. All UWSOD dental students, including clinical dental students, were ordered to stay home during the Spring 2020 quarter. Additionally, the UWSOD DECOD Clinic, which serves adults with developmental and acquired disabilities, was temporarily closed.

We created alternative clinical activities for various phases of the clinical curriculum in the care of adults with developmental and acquired disabilities. Third year dental students interviewed simulated patients and caregivers via Zoom. Dental hygienist and dental assistant staff from the DECOD Clinic played the simulation roles. Fourth year dental students screened DECOD Clinic patients over the phone and conducted teledentistry visits via Zoom. In addition to required courses, fourth year students enrolled in a selective course served as peer mentors for third year students. Faculty participated in all simulation and teledentistry sessions via Zoom and provided coaching to Peer Mentors.

Feedback from learners at all levels of the curriculum has been positive. Third year dental students commented that the simulation experiences were the closest to clinical care they were able to experience during the quarter. They also enjoyed working with peer mentors. Fourth year dental students were initially skeptical about what could be accomplished via patient screening and teledentistry. As the rotation progressed, they found that screening and teledentistry provided meaningful interactions with patients and their caregivers. They were thankful for this as well as the introduction to teledentistry.

Examples of student feedback and reflection are given below:

- “The simulation case was a great way to learn clinical skills with emphasis on communication and history taking with a patient population that we have not had the opportunity to treat previously.”
- “The simulation clinics were honestly the best and closest to clinical settings through this lock-down in my opinion. I love the idea of having a 4th year peer mentor and a faculty directly supervise our process and provide instructions/feedback. This has been an amazing experience.”
- “I was very touched by the conversations I had with the caregivers today. One person in particular... [describes a particularly meaningful interaction].”

Faculty noticed an unexpected benefit of the alternative curriculum. Being able to view students conducting interviews from beginning to end, whether in a simulated scenario or a teledentistry scenario, allowed faculty a more in-depth look into student interviewing skills than possible in a clinical setting. Given the success of the simulation experiences, we hope to incorporate these as a transition between pre-clinical and clinical care in the future. Additionally, teledentistry may provide opportunities to shorten lengthy patient intake visits in the clinic, which is beneficial for

patients and for student learning. Overall, while alternative clinical experiences we designed are not a substitute for clinical care, they provide some advantages that complement clinical care and student learning well.