



Avry Steele treats her patient, Oscar Romero. (Courtesy of Dawn Brause)

FEATURES

Live patients provide crucial experience to MCC dental hygiene students

Charis Hayward 11/24/2021

Mesa Community College dental hygiene students can get valuable hands-on experience through events where members of the public receive dental cleanings for reduced prices.

Deborah Sparks, MCC's dental hygiene program director, said dental hygiene students spend 3 out of 4 semesters working on actual patients. They find patients through recruiting events that take place every February and September to scout potential patients through the college and local media.

Experience with live patients is important for the students because dental hygienists work differently from other types of medical professionals. In other healthcare professions, students will graduate, get their licenses and be supervised on their first job. Dental hygienists work alone from the beginning.

"They have to have live patient experiences in order to be prepared to go into the workforce and not have anybody supervising them," Sparks said.

Sparks said that they look for patients who have a need for dental hygiene services: those who haven't had their teeth cleaned in a long time, suffer from bleeding gums or have gum disease.

Dawn Brause, MCC's second-year dental hygiene clinical coordinator, explained students need patients with puffy or bleeding gums because they need experience with periodontal disease. The recruitment events often focus on deep cleanings, where the dental hygienist gets under the gums to clean away plaque and tartar invisible to the human eye. These areas contain the germs and bacteria responsible for gum disease.

The deep cleanings come with x-rays, head and neck cancer assessments and screenings for oral cancer. The dental students will do gum assessments. After, a doctor will give an exam to address concerns such as toothaches, broken teeth and cavities.

Brause said potential patients don't have any reason to worry about receiving treatment from students. The students are highly experienced by the time they do treatments like this and are

closely monitored by faculty the whole way. Deep cleanings done by schools and students are also far cheaper than cleanings done in dental offices.

“It will cost you almost a thousand dollars to get everything done in a dental office, and then for us, it’s less than half of that for someone that’s not an MCC student,” Brause said.

MCC students can get an even greater discount.

Discounted cleanings provide dental care to people who might not otherwise be able to afford it. Patients may choose to receive cleanings from MCC students because the prices can be lower than the co-pays at a dentist with their insurance. Dental care may be entirely outside the realm of possibility for people without insurance.

Lindsey Cure is one such individual. “I don’t have dental insurance right now, so I kind of rely on stuff like that,” Cure said.

Cure said that she is in constant tooth pain, but cannot afford to seek treatment. She shared that she wasn’t able to afford to have the work that she needed the last time she visited the dentist. She still owes money from that visit.

“I’ve had my own dentist recommend that I go to some kind of school to get work done for cheaper,” Cure said.

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