Dr. Joel Rosenbloom & Dr. Bomee Kim, Breaking Barriers: Ensuring Canadian Dentists are Comfortable with Mental Illness

Dr. O'Keefe: Mental illness indirectly affects all Canadians at some time through a family member, friend or colleague. By age 40, about 50% of the population will have or have had a mental illness. That's us and our patients. Stigma or discrimination attached to mental illnesses present a serious barrier not only to diagnosis and treatment, but also to acceptance in the community. Here's a quote from a recently published story in the Globe and Mail newspaper: "You should see the look on people's faces when they hear that you have an illness with schizo in the title. People are repelled and afraid. The assumptions are rapid and severe." How many health care providers feel this fear and experience that repulsion when a patient reveals that they have a mental illness? Well, by setting up a rotation for dental students at the Center for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, CAMH as it's known, the University of Toronto Faculty of Dentistry is working to reduce such fears and ensure that tomorrow's dentist won't attach negative labels to patients living with a mental illness.

Dr. O'Keefe: To learn about this rotation I have contacted Dr. Joel Rosenbloom, a dentistry faculty member at the University of Toronto and a clinician who practices dentistry at CAMH.

Dr. Rosenbloom: The dental rotation at CAMH is structured in two parts. The first part is at the end of third year, when students are transitioning to fourth year, they do a hospital rotation. So selected students who are matched to the CAMH rotation will come for one whole week, two students will come for a week. This year it's been up to three students and they'll spend the entire morning at CAMH for five days. That will rotate for about three months and we'll have approximately up to 30 or 35 students coming into CAMH. The second rotation takes place in fourth year, where every single fourth-year student comes to CAMH for one morning and we rotate through the approximately 100 fourth-year dental students. What occurs during the rotation is students are usually asked to arrive between 30 and 45 minutes before the patients come and we sit down with a group of students and we look at the entire day of the patients who are booked and we review the patient's charts, both in the dental and the EHR of the hospital.

Dr. Rosenbloom: We look at what they're coming in for and we review the different treatments that are planned, if they are not new patients, and then I usually ask the students "Who hasn't done a post?", "Who hasn't done a denture?", "Who hasn't done this?" and we try to give the students an experience so they can build on what they've already done or do more of what they've done. They do a full range of dental services from restorative to extractions to prostho to perio to endo, and they get to know the patients well. Part of the orientation isn't just to talk about the treatments, but we try to give the students a bit more

background to each of the patients. The medications they're taking, the diagnosis that they have and a little bit about their personal background. Many of them I know, so I can tell the students, oh, John, for example, is someone I've been seeing for two or three years and I give them a little bit of a personal background so that they feel a connection to the patient when they met.

Dr. Rosenbloom: So, the students meet the patients for the first time. They may see them again in the week and then they get to know them. They sit down and the students do all the dental work through the entire week. The CAMH dentists are there to support them, to help them when they have problems, to troubleshoot, to generally be available to help them in any way possible. If there's time in the rotation, we also try to [inaudible] students can have some exposure to the rest of the hospital, to see some of the other programs. Examples are: there's one program that CAMH does called Suits Me Fine, and they have a clothing boutique where they get clothing from all over the city and they use the clothing to help clients who are transitioning to get a job or to leave the hospital, and they come in and they get checked and they, you get clothing for particular occasions for free. The second part is we try to take a walk through some of the inpatient wards, because it's particularly interesting for someone who's never been to an inpatient ward to see the programs that take place, to see the level of illness that people are struggling with from acute to chronic care wards. Just get a sense of what it's like from the inside-out in a psychiatric institution because it's not the sort of thing most people see.

Dr. Rosenbloom: And the last area that we try to give students exposure to is the historical walls and the memorial plaques which talk about the history of treatment of people with mental illness, at CAMH and in general. It's very revealing because the students often, I mean most people don't often know certain small elements to what it was like 100 years ago for someone with a mental illness. So by and large, when the students leave after one week the intent is that not only are they feeling more confident in a number of dental procedures and treating people who have mental illnesses from mild to severe, it could be someone who is out psychotic at the time and they're trying to connect with them and build a relationship so that they can provide a treatment, but also that they understand the context within which the dental clinic operates. That is, we're providing services to a very unique group, but not by any stretch of the imagination, limited to people at CAMH. So, when they graduate, they've got more confidence, more experience, and generally they're more able to understand mental illness how it connects to providing dental services, and just seeing it fit in as a necessary and absolutely essential part to their role as a dental professional.

Dr. O'Keefe: To learn the impact of this rotation on one dental student, I have contacted Dr. Bomee Kim who's a recent dentistry graduate from the University of Toronto.

Dr. Kim: As a dental student at the University of Toronto we had the pleasure of spending a week-long rotation at CAMH, which is one of the mental illness facilities in Toronto. So the rotation at CAMH was one of the highlights of my dental school. Prior to the experience at CAMH, I didn't have that many opportunities to interact with individuals with mental health illnesses. And that being said, I expected some of the patients there to be more difficult to manage and I expected some of them to be even more aggressive.

Dr. Kim: So, the biggest impact that the rotation had on me was, it completely changed my perception and attitudes about this group of individuals. I could now definitely say that I'm comfortable treating these patients in the future. A different impact that the rotation had on me was I saw that a small percentage of the population needed a higher level of sedation in order to receive quality dental care. And that is why I decided to pursue the specialty dental training in dental anesthesia at the University of Toronto, which I'll be starting very soon. My ultimate goal is that can play a role in improving access to care for this population. My advice for all students across Canada is to take advantage of any opportunities that you have to be at a mental health facility. This is because for me, at CAMH, not only you'll learn a lot in terms of dentistry, but at any mental health facility you'll realize that stigma is just a stigma and seeing that will open up a whole new population that you can provide dental treatments for in the future.

Dr. Kim: At the University of Toronto we have something called Mental Health talks, where individuals who have been to the mental health facilities come back and share their experience. Possibly doing this can also improve our comfort zone in terms of new grads, treating this special group, unique group of individuals.

Dr. O'Keefe: Congratulations to Dr. Kim on her recent graduation. We wish her the best in her upcoming graduate studies. I turn again to Dr. Rosenbloom to ask him his hopes for the rotation, based on these experiences to date.

Dr. Rosenbloom: In the future, what are the things that I hope to see in the rotation? Can it grow? We only have two dental, two dentists equivalent FTEs, at CAMH and there's 100 dental students, so there's only so many students that we can accommodate. That being said, some areas where I would love to see it grow are, in the future, I'd like to see the dental students come for a whole week, not just in the mornings but all day long, so they actually leave the faculty and it's almost like a co-op placement. They are CAMH five days. They have lunch there. They get a sense of what happens in the hospital outside of the dental clinic and they leave having had "a job", quote unquote, for five days. To do that I think at the faculty we'd have to arrange some system where students are given credits so they're not feeling like they're penalized for being absent from the clinic for more time. Another area that I personally would like to see happen, and I'm working on, would be a course in psychiatry and dentistry at the dental school,

where we have a six or seven lecture series course mandatory for third-year students and we have different speakers who could address everything from the historical treatment of people with mental illness, to anti-stigma programs, to general information about psychiatry and the interrelationship between psychiatry and dentistry. So, that at the end of it, when students are then launched into the CAMH rotation, they have this didactic framework to help to organize their understanding and thoughts around the rotation.

Dr. Rosenbloom: I would also just like to see the Mental Health Talks continue because the stories that I hear from the students when they get up there on stage and address their colleagues, fellow students, faculty and staff about their experience at CAMH is always always moving. Things that I would never think about being a staff dentist. I hear students talk about it and it helps me to shape and frame the rotation for following years. For the profession, for us in general, the easiest way to sum it up is I would love to see a continued effort to decrease stigma and associated discrimination of people with mental illness. I think uit was summed up best two years ago at one of the mental health talks when a student, now a dentist, finished her talk about her rotation and the impact and then she just looked at the crowd and stopped for a minute and said, I have friends with mental illness and I see how hard it is for them. And all I would hope for is that every one of us has a little more kindness and compassion. And when she said that, you could see across the entire room the silence and the awe in something as simple as that.

Dr. Rosenbloom: So, from a professional point of view, starting with students, new grads, dentists, just an overall concerted effort for all of us to address stigma towards people with mental illness.

Dr. O'Keefe: We look forward to keeping an eye on how this rotation develops in the future. And we welcome insights from viewers and readers about any other initiatives they know of designed to help make it more comfortable for patients to visit the dental office.