

COMMENTARY

Improving Health Globally Through Education

By

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As Dr. Habib Benzian notes in his essay, global health, including global oral health, has become a topic of great interest and tremendous growth in higher education in recent years. Indeed, the number of universities and colleges offering opportunities to participate in international, health-related projects and even degree programs has been growing exponentially. New York University is at the forefront of this movement. NYU has adopted a multifaceted approach to educating students and reducing health disparities globally through programs offered by its colleges and campuses in New York City and across the globe. The University's commitment to addressing complex global health problems is especially apparent in the recent establishment of the NYU College of Global Public Health, which has fostered interdisciplinary approaches to these problems. The attraction for both faculty and students to global health is obvious, altruism aside: The opportunity to visit exotic locales; help those in need in resource-limited communities; and empower them with the so-called wisdom of the West.

While programs to address health disparities in economically developing nations can at times be misguided — however well-intentioned

— vehicles that are thoughtfully designed to educate and perform research activities in resource-limited communities can be effective on many levels for the participating communities as well as for the students and educators. Notably, such programs may also foster a desire to assist people with oral health disparities in the students' own communities. Indeed, educational and research experiences in global health can provide tremendous opportunities to learn from the communities being served, if the knowledge gained includes insights into how healthcare challenges can be addressed with limited resources using novel solutions, something that could potentially be adapted to addressing health problems in our own resource-rich communities. In all cases, the key to any solution holding the promise of long-term positive impact on the health of a community is sustainability.

Clearly, a one-answer-fits-all approach does not work, and programs focused on prevention must take into account foremost the unique characteristics of each community. This goes far beyond merely making adjustments for population socioeconomic demographics; one must also consider the healthcare workforce, healthcare delivery model, availability of materials and supplies, and governmental policies and controls, among other factors.

While solutions addressing oral diseases, in particular dental caries and periodontitis, may appear conceptually to be simple ("focus on prevention"), devising programs that succeed both in improving the health of populations and are self-sustaining over time is highly challenging. Fortunately, there are no limits to the creativity and passion of researchers committed to developing such solutions. Clearly, a one-answer-fits-all approach does not work, and programs focused on prevention must take into account foremost the unique characteristics of each community. This goes far beyond merely making adjustments for population socioeconomic demographics; one must also consider the healthcare workforce, healthcare delivery model, availability of materials and supplies, and governmental policies and controls, among other factors.

One aspect colleagues and I have concentrated on to address these global health challenges is enhancing the training of the oral healthcare workforce in developing nations, in particular in East Africa. Both the capabilities of the healthcare workforce to meet the needs of the community and the capacity of the healthcare educational training institutions have been evaluated. The data revealed a severe shortage of trained healthcare professionals with significant need for additional skills to manage oral diseases in their communities. Hence, the project focused not only on growing the size of the workforce but also on enhancing the training of healthcare professions students to enable them to better address the current oral healthcare needs of their com-

munities, primarily through prevention and the use of economically viable solutions. This capacity-building approach has been further expanded to involve nontraditional, community-based workers in health promotion through the training of teachers, community leaders, allied health professionals, and others to perform simple preventive procedures and provide education to a wide range of the population. Accordingly, it is predictable that with an end-goal of educating everyone in the community about prevention and management of oral health, improvements in the overall health of the population will ensue.

Given the complex challenges of treating oral diseases, both locally and globally, preventing disease from occurring should be the

method of choice for maintaining health. Educational and research programs in global oral health have furthered the dental community's interest in strengthening their focus on prevention and improving the health of our patients, our communities, and the world. Multifaceted solutions have yielded the most favorable results, and innovation in science, technology, behavior, and many other areas will help achieve even better results. While most scientific methodologies for improving global oral health have been small in magnitude (one community, one university, one school system), implementation science may help guide the scaling up of these evidence-based prevention approaches to improve oral health on a truly global level. ■