

You Can

CARE

About We Care

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*We Care Dental Center in Rancho Mirage,
California, performs much-needed procedures
for disabled patients*

Have you ever performed a root canal on a child with autism or Down syndrome? How about made a crown for an adult with cerebral palsy? Fact is, if you have, you are in the vast minority. Most dentists have not.

Dental schools rarely have a curriculum centered on the disabled population. Since seeing disabled patients requires a certain confidence, as well as longer appointment times, many clinicians choose not to treat this segment of the population, leaving many disabled children and adults with unmet dental needs.

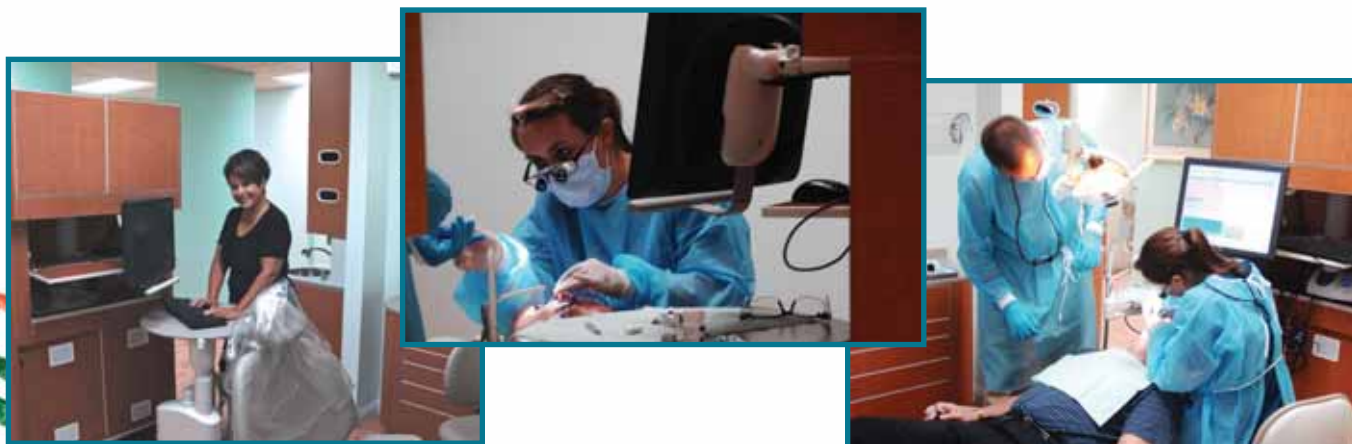
Desert Friends of the Developmentally Disabled (DFDD), a nonprofit charity founded by Russell and Marianne Benson, is dedicated to serving and supporting the special needs of the developmentally disabled. The organization realized the problem of unmet dental needs and did something about it. The We Care Dental Center started small in December of 2009. They borrowed space two to three days a week and operated off donated supplies, but the clinic didn't stay small for long. In September 2011, a permanent 1,210-square-foot, four-chair clinic was opened in Rancho Mirage, California.

The clinic runs successfully via its numerous volunteers – five dentists, as well as several dental and hygiene stu-

dents from Western University. The students are able to provide dental cleanings, examinations and fillings. Under the supervision of a dentist, the students can perform root canals and tooth extractions as well. It's a win-win situation. The patients receive needed care and the students gain experience they can't receive in the classroom.

The patients also provide the volunteers with a sense of compassion and humanism. Dr. Timothy Martinez, Western University's dean of community outreach, hopes that by treating disabled patients now, the students will learn how to treat these types of patients and not exclude them once they start their own practices.

Those dentists who choose to treat disabled patients often choose to do so with general anesthesia. We Care prides itself on not using anesthesia. In fact, the clinic is not even set up to administer it. Majorie Lumbley, a disabled patient's mother, said she often postponed teeth cleanings for her daughter, Tina, because she didn't want to subject Tina to anesthesia. Tina commented on We Care saying, "It's like going to a real dentist's office. You go and you are treated like everyone else."



Another reason We Care chooses not to administer anesthesia is because many of the patients whom the clinic treats have extensive medical histories. Many are on large amounts of medication, and Dr. Mel Glick, a member of the board of directors, notes, "We don't want to over-medicate." Glick acknowledges that although many handicapped patients can be successfully treated without anesthesia, there are still rare cases that will require it. Since We Care does not have an anesthesiologist on staff, it cannot provide these services.

Glick argues that treating a disabled patient isn't much different than treating any other patient. Many dentists approach the idea of treating a disabled individual with some trepidation, but it usually stems from the fact that they haven't ever done so. He says it really just involves "earning their trust and confidence." His advice: speak softly and help them to understand you have their best interest at heart. He adds, "It takes patience, love and tenderness," but says, the process and procedures are the same.

Disabled patients generally have extensive caries and periodontal disease. As a group, they tend not to brush well and might need to be seen by a dentist more frequently than others. They usually have a lot of missing teeth, as well as abscessed and mobile teeth, Glick says. We Care performs procedures similar to any dental office – X-rays, dental exams, periodontal probing, cleaning, debriding, root planing, root canal treatment and build up of dentition. The clinic also provides some restorative and prosthodontic options.

Serving the Coachella Valley, the clinic treats children, adults and the elderly with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mental retardation, muscular sclerosis, bi-polar and brain damage.

"We don't have to find patients." Glick says. "They seem to find us." Since such a practice model is fairly rare,

word of We Care got out to the disabled community very quickly via referrals and the local dental societies. "We find that our demographic population will drive hours to receive dental treatment for family and loved ones," Glick notes.

Unfortunately, many of these patients cannot afford to pay for the care they receive. The money they earn goes toward covering their immediate living expenses, and dental insurance is rare. For this reason, most services provided by the clinic are provided at no charge to the patient. Since all nonprofit organizations are competing for the same dollar in this economic time, it is difficult for the center to attain the needed funds. Glick says most of its funds are obtained through fundraisers as well as grants from various private and governmental agencies.

We Care is looking for volunteer dentists, hygienists, dental assistants, and any other people or organizations willing to help. All you have to do is call and sign up. If you are interested in helping, call 760-565-6055 or e-mail dfddnow@me.com. The We Care Dental Center is located at 42-900 Bob Hope Drive, Suite 111 in Rancho Mirage, California. ■

Remembering Russell Benson

During the writing of this article, **Russell Benson (1940-2012)**, co-founder of DFDD and We Care Dental, passed away. Benson was 71 and had dedicated his career to developing various charities and health-care infrastructures. He held the CFO position for the National Childhood Cancer Foundation in Arcadia, California. He went on to help develop the Nevada Cancer Institute in Las Vegas, Nevada, where he was the executive vice president/CFO. He co-founded DFDD with his wife after he retired. His dream was to open We Care Dental Center, a legacy he has left to the world. He died March 17, 2012 and services were held March 31.

