Program Highlight

Oral Health Program Ensures the High Quality of Dental Care

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It’s a bright Tuesday morning and Maritza Cabezas, DDS, MPH, is visiting a local community health center. Standing in a dental exam room with clinic staff, she says, “Since you can’t see pathogenic organisms, let’s suppose this room is infected. Show me how you would clean this room after a patient visit.” One of the dental assistants, wearing a sterile gown, gloves, and goggles, moves into action. She flushes out the dental lines for 20 seconds to prevent biofilm formation; transports the contaminated instruments; removes her gloves and washes her hands using the proper techniques; and wipes down the chairs, lights, counters, handles, suction, and instruments. Dr. Cabezas says, “Are you familiar with the proper method of disposing of amalgam filling scraps that were removed from patients’ old fillings?” The assistant shows her the EPA-approved amalgam recycling container. Dr. Cabezas takes this opportunity to remind the assistant that amalgam contains mercury, and that’s why the scraps can’t just be tossed in with the regular refuse.

This is just one educational opportunity Dr. Cabezas, Director of the Department of Public Health’s Oral Health Program (Quality Improvement Division), will utilize during the course of this 4-hour dental audit.

This annual audit is segmented into three parts: the pre-audit conference, where she discusses new regulations and requirements and educates the staff on the latest standards of care;
the clinic walk-through, where she inspects the sterilization equipment and logs as well as exam rooms and asks the staff to run through their infection control procedures before and after a dental visit; and the exit conference, where she discusses her findings and reviews each item for correction. She offers ideas and solutions for any corrective action, since the goal of a dental audit is to help the dental clinic come into or remain in compliance to help ensure the protection and safety of patients as well as staff.

This auditing protocol consists of many components, including radiology requirements, Cal/OSHA regulations, infection control, sterilization procedures, emergency preparedness, environmental regulations, patient safety and confidentiality, clinic policy and procedures related to child and elder abuse reporting, infectious disease reporting, amalgam disposal, disinfection of hard surfaces, staff training on bloodborne pathogen contamination, and Proposition 65 compliance (specifically, to be informed about exposures to chemicals that cause cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive harm).

Today’s audit is but one of the nearly 50 dental audits the Oral Health Program conducts every year. These audits, which are performed at community health care clinics and health centers in LA County that accept Healthy Way LA funds, are mandated by the LA County Board of Supervisors.

Oral health is among the topic areas in the Healthy People 2020 objectives. “Protecting the health and safety of dental patients and staff in LA County through audits is a crucial part of our Oral Health Program,” says Dr. Cabezas, who has been conducting these audits for 13 years, “but we have several other areas of focus as well.” These other areas include education, especially regarding early childhood caries [cavities] and transmission of oral pathogens; access to quality care; prevention of dental disease in general through efforts such as water fluoridation and fluoride varnish; and serving as a clearinghouse for the dental concerns of LA County’s population.

Through its dental clinic audits, education and oral hygiene messages, the department’s Oral Health Program is helping to ensure the high quality of dental care in LA County—and brighter smiles all around!