

Tarheel Footprints in Healthcare

Recognizing unusual and often unsung contributions of individual citizens who have made healthcare for North Carolinians more accessible and of higher quality

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North Carolina is facing one of the most severe shortages of dentists and primary dental care of any state. Nationally, there are 5.7 dentists per 10,000 population. As of 2004, North Carolina had 4.2 dentists per 10,000. The ratio of dentists-to-population is quite different in metropolitan and rural areas of the state, where there were 4.8 dentists per 10,000 population in urban areas and only 3.1 dentists per 10,000 population in rural areas.

North Carolina's ratio of dentists-to-population is 27% lower than the national average. In fact, North Carolina ranks 47th among the states in terms of the dentist-to-population ratio. Moreover, the maldistribution in this state that has resulted in four eastern North Carolina counties not having a single dentist, three other counties having only a single dentist, and as many as 40 counties in North Carolina where there is no dentist willing to serve a Medicaid patient. This means that small, rural counties in our state are in a considerably more underserved situation than are our urban areas. Even in our metropolitan counties, obtaining services can be difficult

if one is covered only by the Medicaid program or otherwise dependent on subsidized (or free) care through local public health departments, migrant or community health centers, or other "safety net" providers.

The good news is that there are dentists in this state, and a few major healthcare organizations, who have stepped up to the plate and taken on the huge task of finding a better way of organizing and providing needed primary dental care services for those most in need. One of those organizations is FirstHealth of the Carolinas, a not-for-profit integrated healthcare system headquartered in Pinehurst in Moore County, but serving a primary service area that includes five North Carolina counties. One of those dentists is Dr. Sharon Nicholson Harrell, who came to FirstHealth in 1998 to launch a dental care program serving those least able to obtain dental care in the counties served by FirstHealth. Through her efforts, three clinics have been opened under the sponsorship of FirstHealth (a full-time clinic in Southern Pines and part-time clinics in Troy and Raeford). These dental centers employ four dentists, 13 full-time staff, and several fill-in dentists and auxiliaries. These dental centers have served more than 13,000 children since they opened the first clinic in Southern Pines in 1998. Approximately 70% of children seen in the first year had either never seen a dentist or had not seen a dentist within the last year.

Dr. Harrell came to her position in Moore County after having served for seven years as Dental Director of the Cumberland County Health Department in Fayetteville, and before that for three years as a public health dentist in York, Pennsylvania. After graduation from the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Dentistry, she was a fellow in general dentistry at the University of Maryland and then received a master's of public health degree at the UNC School of Public Health. When she was hired by FirstHealth, she was charged with the tasks of planning, designing, and opening three regional centers to provide comprehensive dental care to low-income children up to age 18, administering the centers, serving as an area dental public health consultant, and functioning as the liaison with private dentists in the local area and the state. In each of these arenas, Dr. Harrell has become widely recognized as highly effective, and her opinions and experience in the organization and provision of dental care to the most in-need populations of our state have been sought by many, both in North Carolina and nationally. FirstHealth's new dental care program for low-income children was funded by the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust and The Duke Endowment.

Charles Frock, CEO of FirstHealth, had this to say about Dr. Harrell: "She has distinguished herself professionally in many ways. She has been nationally recognized for the way she mentors young dental health professionals. She is recognized throughout North Carolina for her public health approach to dental care for the underserved, and she is known by her patients and her colleagues as a completely caring, compassionate, and accessible caregiver."

Although meeting the primary dental health needs of underserved children through such special-purpose "safety net" programs as the one begun by FirstHealth of the Carolinas is not likely to meet the majority of unmet need for these services statewide, the 1,000 patient visits these clinics now offer each month, including 8,000 preventive dental sealants they provide yearly, and the 100 new patients they enroll each month are significant and grateful beneficiaries of a model program now being studied and replicated elsewhere. In Dr. Harrell's own words, "It's not only about filling cavities. It's about filling a big need in our community."

For her untiring efforts and considerable accomplishments in meeting the dental healthcare needs of so many children in our state, the Editors of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* are pleased to recognize Dr. Sharon Nicholson Harrell and FirstHealth of the Carolinas for these contributions to the health of the Tar Heel State.