

Pitt dentists to focus on needs of disabled

By **Allison M. Heinrichs**

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Dr. Erik Scheifele dreams of the day the University of Pittsburgh School of Dental Medicine's Center for Patients with Special Needs goes out of business.

"We have two main goals. One is to provide comprehensive care for the patients, but the second is educating the next generation of dentists and hygienists," said Scheifele, the center's director. "If we can make them comfortable caring for these patients in their own clinic, then some day the center might not be needed."

The center celebrates its opening today on Pitt's campus in Oakland.

"The need is definitely there," said Kate Bayer, who has worked with people with developmental disabilities for 19 years at Milestone, a Downtown-based nonprofit behavioral-health provider. "It is always problematic to find dentists ... to treat our individuals."

Pitt's School of Dental Medicine has treated special-needs patients for nearly 40 years, said Dr. Thomas Braun, dean of the school. However, those patients were typically seen in a space carved out once a week from the pediatric dental clinic, limiting the school to 600 special-needs patients.

"Because there's such a demand for patients with special needs to get oral health care, we have been unable to accept new patients," Braun said.

The center will accommodate at least 2,000 patients, expected to come from Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio and New York.

Dental school students will be required to complete a rotation in the center. The goal is get those students to accept a few special-needs patients when they set up their practices.

"That is absolutely wonderful," said Dr. John Rutkauskas, CEO of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. "We, as an organization, advocate that because, historically, pediatric dentists have taken care of the lion's share of special-needs patients, even in their adulthood. But it is best if general dentists can accept these patients as they become adults."

The center has a private, wheelchair-accessible entrance, a quiet room for nervous patients, chairs that can accommodate heavier patients up to 500 pounds, a hand-held X-ray machine that can be used on difficult-to-position patients and anesthesia capabilities.

Before beginning construction, the school consulted several people knowledgeable about the needs of the patients, including Dr. Nancy Minshew, director of Pitt's Center for Excellence in Autism Research.

"It is important that they included separated spaces where the patients wouldn't feel trapped, where there wasn't too much clutter, where the art on the walls and the paint isn't always changing," she said. "People with autism rely a lot on things being the same -- memory is a very strong suit for them -- and when they go into a room and it looks the same, they can feel safe."

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