

Inside

the life of a

Public Health Dental Assistant

Angelita arrived at her dental clinic at 8:00 to set up for the day – readying the machines, organizing charts, and flushing fresh water through the hoses. It was the quietest time of the day. As the only Public Health clinic serving a fairly large area, this was a busy place – usually booked up to two months in advance, and almost every day scrambling to squeeze in emergencies as well.

This morning one such emergency arrived as soon as the clinic opened. A mother brought in her four-year old son, who had been awake through the night with a toothache. Angelita let them in, and noted the child's distress and the mom's exhaustion as they registered.

There were many different aspects to being a dental assistant – assisting the dentist at chairside, taking

x-rays, educating patients about oral hygiene and nutrition, and cleaning and sterilizing the dental instruments – but for Angelita, the most important part of the job was in her interactions with the public. A visit to the dental office was fraught with anxieties for many people, and she did whatever she could to make the experience as pleasant as possible.

The dentist decided to see the boy immediately. Angelita led him into the dentists' chair and stayed close as the dentist examined his teeth and gums. The pain was coming from a large, deep cavity – but it was only one of several. The tooth could be saved, but the dentist was



concerned about the neglect that had led to the decay. He asked Angelita to bring the mom in, showed her the cavities, and explained the importance of caring for teeth. He then got her permission to proceed with the fillings.

When the treatment was complete, Angelita had to make sure the mom understood what the dentist had told her. This was not always easy. Language was sometimes an issue with immigrant families, as

were norms that overlooked the brushing and flossing of children's teeth. As well, the families that came to her clinic were usually struggling to get by, and oral hygiene just wasn't at the top of their list. More than that, though, she found that a lot of parents didn't want to hear that they are responsible for their child's oral health. They want to just bring the child in, have the teeth fixed, and leave.



This mother, though, had been awake most of the night with an unhappy child. She watched carefully as Angelita took a plastic model of a mouth with teeth and showed how to brush and floss. Angelita then gave the mom a toothbrush and asked her to demonstrate on her son. The mom was a quick study, and Angelita felt that the family's oral health was off to a new start.

The rest of the morning was taken up with a variety of patients. One teenager needed fillings for the second time in a year – with no evidence that he had picked up a toothbrush since his last visit. Several other children came in who had been referred by a school screening program, and one young mother-to-be arrived, referred by a Public Health nurse, who had never been to a dentist in her life.

The dentist was attending a conference that afternoon, so Angelita switched gears after lunch to join a team that specialized in working with seniors. She had worked on such a team previously, and enjoyed its particular challenges and rewards: visiting long-term care centres, cleaning dentures with an ultrasonic machine, giving brushing demonstrations, and teaching caregivers how to care for the oral health of residents who couldn't care for themselves.

The facility in which they were working had been screened by a hygienist, who had compiled a list of residents needing help with their oral hygiene. Of course, providing that help often presented its own

challenges. Some residents suffered from dementia in one form or another, which occasionally left them with an uncooperative streak.

Angelita began to work through her list one by one – removing the dentures, cleaning them and, if necessary, labeling them. This was an important step – if dentures were removed during a hospital visit, they

might never find their way back to their owner without a name.

Angelita made pleasant small talk with most of the residents, but hit a few snags as well. One woman at first refused Angelita's help, then swore at her, took out the dentures and threw them. After Angelita had cleaned them, she didn't know what to expect – but the woman's face lit up and she said, "Oh, they look so shiny, like stars!" Another

woman insisted that she had just brushed her dentures and they didn't need cleaning. When Angelita finally persuaded her to have them cleaned, she saw they were absolutely coated in hard plaque – a source of potentially dangerous bacteria.

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Her last client of the day was a man who still had all his teeth and must have cared for them all his life, but his hands were now bent with arthritis. Angelita showed the caregiver how to help him floss and brush – which took time and patience, to be sure; but when they had finished, the man looked at her with a smile and slowly said, "That feels a heck of a lot better". The challenges and rewards of working with seniors weren't understood by everyone – but Angelita loved it.

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