



### ABSTRACT

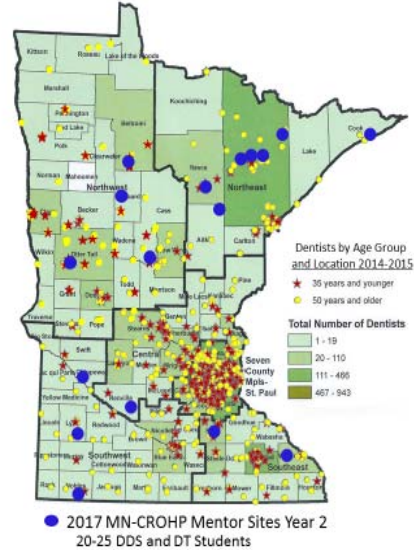
**Objectives:** The Rural Dentistry Scholars Program aims to a) provide opportunities for dental and dental therapy students for individual mentoring by a rural dentist and inter-professional collaboration with public health nurses, medical residents, and other health providers; and b) learn first-hand oral health disparities in rural areas. The ultimate goal is for students to return to rural areas after graduation.

**Methods:** Dental and dental therapy students apply to the program in their 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year. Students are enrolled in the Rural Dentistry Scholars Program elective course, undergo training in Basic Screening Survey and application of fluoride varnish. Students are assigned a mentor and spend three weeks in their rural practice. In addition students conduct screenings and apply fluoride varnish during county fairs, and at community clinics, and teach oral hygiene in K-12 schools.

**Results:** 36 dental and dental therapy students were placed with a rural dentist in different counties across the state. Student responses in focus groups and reflection papers show an increased awareness of the oral health needs in rural communities especially among children, discover that a rural practice can be very busy, develop a new appreciation of rural living and gain insights into the life of a rural dentist in and outside of the practice. Students who express intent to practice in a rural community retain their interest, a few conclude they prefer a non-rural practice.

**Conclusion:** Immersion in a rural community, mentoring by a rural dentist and networking early on in the dental curriculum enable students to gain a more objective picture of the needs and opportunities in rural communities and serve as motivating factors for rural dental practice.

### DENTAL HPSA IN MINNESOTA



Rural communities persistently face shortage of oral health providers, residents have higher rates of tooth decay and have to travel long distances to access care. A large number of rural dentists are retiring and younger dentists are unwilling to work in rural areas.

### MENTORS EVALUATION

#### What I Learned

"Having them in your home helps give them a better sense of rural life."

"When you teach someone, it keeps you constantly evaluating what you are doing, and why, and if there is a better way."

"Being able to show someone dentistry outside the school setting, open their eyes to new experiences."

#### What Students Learned

"Patient interaction and critical thinking during patient care"

"Exposure to the overall health team and gaining an appreciation for the integration of oral health and primary medical care."

"Seeing how a small dental office can operate, how it manages patient flow, and how busy things can be in a small town."

"My student spent time at the local retirement homes teaching how to brush and floss and even clean dentures. He went to local fairs, hospitals and schools to present and meet with the community about oral hygiene."

"She gave oral hygiene instructions and oral health information at adult and children's day cares, homeless shelters, Boys and Girls Club, regional schools, county fairs and more."

"She attended hospital and clinic summer social barbecue, interacting with physicians, nurses, technicians and other staff."

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON MENTORS

"My mentor showed me how he participated in the community to show that he was there for them and not just to be the dentist."

"The dentists were willing to share anything from their theory of practice, to their books, insurance, personal lives. I felt like I made a genuine connection to the office."

"The biggest surprise was the amount of business that the dentist actually gets in a rural area."

"What was most valuable for me was definitely gaining a mentor. I've already been in touch with my mentor multiple times since I left. I think he'll be a very good resource for me moving forward whether I have questions about rural practice or other career paths. He is just very supportive."

### INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

"I helped the nurses do the fluoride varnish. I was able to teach them a better strategy – the knee to knee lap."

"I taught parents on basic oral hygiene that the midwife and the physician appreciated. It is not something that they practice everyday so it was good to team together and blend our scope of practice."

"I met a group of nurses who wanted me to come back as much as possible to help them with a tool kit that they use in their patient education program that they don't have the expertise for."

"The dental therapists can work at the top of their scope of practice. Dr. Z. really trusts them. Between Dr. Z and the dental therapists, they see about 60 patients a day."