

# The UT Dental Branch Serves Needs of the Medically Complex Patient

By Erika Durham Hargrove, *Dental Branch*



Dental Assistants Cheryl Miller, left, and Elma Gallardo review patient records together at the end of a long day. Photos by Brain Schnupp

The key to the success of the Medically Complex Patient Clinic is really quite simple — being undeniably different.

You see it as soon as you hit the door. There's a gentler voice, a lighter touch, a slower pace, an experienced ear.

Together, the four dental assistants who staff the clinic have a total of 88 years of experience in dentistry. This is the kind of sustained service needed when it comes to patients who are medically complex — wheelchair bound, mentally impaired or experiencing a variety of other medical conditions that require special attention.

Some patients seen in the clinic are

preparing for major surgery or organ transplants, which they cannot undergo without a clean bill of health from their dentist. This is the clinic they come to.

Each day the assistants work closely with physicians and family members to check medical history and any underlying problems so that they can provide the best care possible.

On average, the assistants at the six-chair clinic see 24 patients daily. And each year more than 100 dental and dental hygiene students complete their rotations through the facility.

"The clinic deals with patients who have a variety of issues externally as well as internally such as diabetes, hepatitis C and HIV," said Cheryl Miller, dental

assistant III, who has worked at the Dental Branch for 27 years. "When you are dealing with this type of patient you have no choice but to do what needs to be done," she said.

Miller said the opportunity to help the people who need it most is what has kept her at the clinic for so long.

Mattie Wyche, dental assistant II, who has worked at the Dental



Dental Assistant Mattie Wyche assists a patient in the clinic.

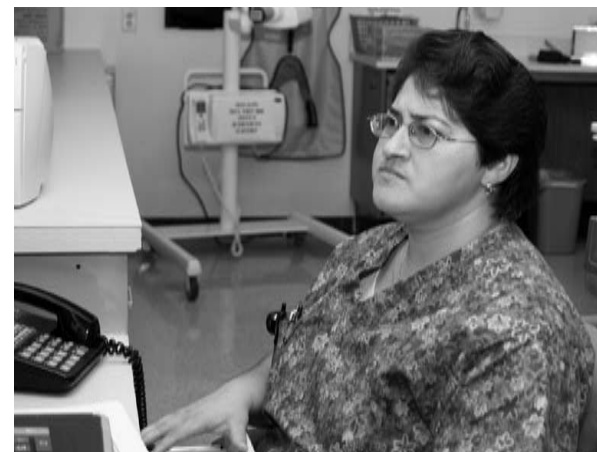
Branch for nine years and the Medically Complex Patient clinic for seven, said she also enjoys the challenge of caring for those with severe problems. "You have to be patient, concerned and really care about what you are doing," she said. "A lot of people who come here need more than just dental work; they need support from us as well."

Elma Gallardo, dental assistant II, who is also certified to dispense nitrous oxide, has 22 years of experience and brings a private practice perspective to this unique academic setting.

Gallardo has worked at Ben Taub Hospital and Scurlock Tower. "While at Ben Taub, we were trained to look at the person as a whole person, not just their mouths," she said. "And that training is what has helped me tremendously here in the Medically Complex Patient Clinic.

"The benefit of having a good assistant is priceless," said Gallardo. "A lot of times the patients will open up to the dental assistants and not to the dentist. They are often more comfortable with us, so we may be able to get important information about how they are feeling."

Marina Munoz, dental assistant II, who has 10 years of experience, says that much of the job her team is able to do is due to Kishore Shetty, D.D.S.,



Dental Assistant Marina Munoz closely reviews clinic information.

clinic director, who is also an associate professor of Restorative Dentistry at the Dental Branch. For example, Shetty encouraged the team to design a table clinic, which won first place at the Star of the South Dental Meeting early this year.

While working in the Medically Complex Patient Clinic, Munoz has worked with students, faculty and residents. She also uses her skills to assist in other clinics, including the faculty practice clinic and oral surgery. Being fluent in Spanish is also a tremendous help in the clinic, which is tremendously diverse.

"There is an excitement, privilege and satisfaction that comes with caring for the medically complex patient," Shetty said. "Sometimes I marvel at the compassion and commitment with which my team does their job. They truly enjoy working with these patients. It truly takes special people to work with special needs patients."

For more information about the Medically Complex Patient Clinic, call 713-500-4296. ★

## Mentors Recognized with President's Awards at Committee on the Status of Women Banquet

By Pamela Lewis, *Institutional Advancement*

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Three members of the UT Health Science Center community received President's Awards for Mentoring Women at the annual Committee on the Status of Women Annual Awards Banquet in December.

- Recipients were: Classified Staff — **Virginia Q. Wall**, social work supervisor in the department of Pediatrics at the Medical School;
- Administrative and Professional — Paula O'Neill, Ed.D, associate dean for educational research and professional development at the Dental Branch; and
- Faculty—John H. Byrne, Ph.D., professor and chairman of the department of Neurobiology and Anatomy at the Medical School and director of the health science center's W. M. Keck Center for the Neurobiology of Learning and Memory.

Dr. O'Neill's acceptance speech, excerpted below, offered a concise

picture of what mentoring is and is not: "Mentoring is a great calling. We have the opportunity to actively help current and future faculty, staff and administrators mold their future. As a result of this calling, we possess a piece of the process that allows us to be enriched as we mentor others.

"Over the years, I've come to realize that

mentoring comes in many forms: It comes from a single individual, from a constellation of mentors, from those who are both senior and junior to you or who are your peers, from both females and males.

"It may be a formal or an informal relationship. Mentoring comes from learning from mistakes, from learning from the successes of others, from careful listening to mentors who are courageous enough to point out missteps and opportunities.

"Mentoring is a professional obligation that allows us to assist our colleagues as they pursue their professional and personal goals. No one should be allowed to

fail because I might not have taken the time to help mentor those individuals who took a misstep or fell off their planned course.

"Those mentors that I know and admire that are the most mem-

orable are those who have: optimism — about the future; idealism; resolution — that you can do this and so will I; belief in the person being mentored; good will — keeping the best interests of the mentored person in mind, not personal advancement for the mentor; and the ability to encourage those being mentored to learn new ways to

think about themselves.

Mentors must give of themselves through their: time, knowledge, insight, caring, a genuine interest in being a 'good' mentor, and being there."

• In addition to the President's Awards for Mentoring Women, a number of other awards were presented at the banquet.

**Camille Lloyd**, Ph.D., one of the founders of the Committee on the Status of Women and longtime director of Student Counseling Services, was honored with a special award for her service to women and students at the university and to the cause of mentoring (look for more information in an article in an upcoming issue of *Distinctions*).

**Nancy W. Dickey**, M.D., president of the Texas A&M Health Science Center and vice chancellor for Health Affairs for the Texas A&M University System, received the CSW's Distinguished Professional Woman Award (look for more information in an article in an upcoming issue of *Distinctions*).

Seven women students each received a \$500 travel award to enable them to attend professional or scientific meetings to enhance their career development. The student award winners:



Stephanie Tambarlo, CSW chair

- **Laura J. Benjamins**, M.D., MPH in Health Promotion/Health Education student at the School of Public Health (SPH);
- **Cheryl S. Broussard**, a Ph.D. candidate in epidemiology at SPH;
- **Sanaz Ekhlassi**, a second, year student in the D.D.S. program at the Dental Branch;
- **Erin M. Koers**, Ph.D. candidate in epidemiology at SPH;
- **Daisy Y. Morales-Campos**, Ph.D. candidate in Behavioral Sciences at SPH;
- **Susan Rinkus**, a master's student in the gerontological nursing practice program at the School of Nursing; and
- **Rose Thelus**, a Ph.D. candidate in Epidemiology at SPH. ★