

A Concept for a
Dental Not-For-Profit Organization to
Provide Assistance to Needy Parents So Their Children
Can Have Increased Access to Dental Care
Utilizing General Anesthesia

by

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Maria Martinez, an eight-year-old third-grader, winces as she drinks her chocolate milk at lunchtime. Like many of her classmates, Maria is silently coping with one of the most common chronic diseases facing children in America today, dental decay. Unfortunately, Maria is now at the age where her permanent teeth are affected and will probably need to have an adult molar extracted by the time she gets dental treatment. Thousands of children cope with the chronic pain of dental decay everyday; and, like Maria, they accept this constant discomfort as part of life.

From infancy children face an environmental and dietary up-hill battle. Young parents, many of whom come from lower-socio-economic families, are often undereducated when it comes to their children's dental health. Babies falling asleep in strollers with milk bottles in their hands, Coca Cola and other soft drinks being introduced to children as young as six months of age, and "100% juice" being substituted for water between meals are all common factors contributing to tooth decay in today's society.

Often parents will say, "Those teeth came in rotten." Sadly, this observation is quite true. As soon as the deciduous "baby teeth" break through the gums, diet and lack of dental hygiene begin the decaying process that inevitably leads to chronic pain, dental abscesses, emergency room visits, infection, and ultimately early extraction of these teeth. This phenomenon is not restricted to older children. I have personally been involved with children as young as 16 months who have already required multiple extractions and restorative treatment on all their erupted teeth. It is sad to experience how this preventable disease destroys the smiles of even the babies in our communities.

Dentistry faces its own challenges in treating these children. Children with the highest decay rate are often from low-income families that have state-subsidized insurance or none at all. Finding a provider who accepts these plans can be difficult, especially when the children have rampant decay and are very young, scared, and extremely uncooperative. Often general dentists do not want to deal with these very young children with behavioral problems and recommend that they come back to the dental office when they turn five. For this reason, parents often delay treatment while their children's decay continues to worsen, requiring their children to learn to cope with persistent underlying dental pain. These untreated cavities are associated with the following problems:

- Children living with chronic pain
- Issues with malnutrition
- Missed school attendance (Dental-related issues are the most common reason for missed school days for school-aged children.)
- Low self esteem stemming from "ugly"-looking, decayed teeth and bad breath
- Dental infections that can spread to the brain and result in death (Two cases have been in the news just in the last 12 months.)

It is only when these children develop dental abscesses and cry throughout the night that parents are forced to seek out emergency treatment.

Pediatric dentists accept the responsibility and face the challenges for providing dental treatment to children. One of the biggest challenges that pediatric dentists face is treating children with rampant decay (often 16 or more teeth involved) that have already encountered negative experiences in more than one dental office. Because children have such short attention spans, the length of time they can tolerate in a dental chair is limited. Large treatment plans can require as many as five to six appointments to complete treatment. Faced with hectic work schedules, parents find it difficult to get so much time off work; and children, after the second or third appointment, frequently become frightened and uncooperative and negatively anticipate their next trip to the dentist.

When children initially present to the office in acute pain as a result of a mouth full of dental decay and infection, an extended treatment plan is not always possible or in the patient's best interest. This need for urgent care often requires that children be restrained for treatment, thus causing them to be terrified of visiting the dentist.

These young, fearful, and uncooperative dental patients greatly benefit from I.V. deep sedation/general anesthesia. Most insurance companies only cover anesthesia in a hospital operating room. However, many dentists prefer in-office general anesthesia and feel this option provides a convenient and cost-effective way of treating these children in a less intimidating setting that is comfortable and familiar to all the parties involved.

The following is a list of important benefits in-office general anesthesia provides for dentists, children, and their parents.

- Fearful and uncooperative children can be treated in a professionally monitored setting that is comfortable, convenient, and familiar to the dentist and the patient.
- There is no need for dentists to go through the headaches involved in obtaining and maintaining hospital privileges and transporting special dental equipment to the hospital.
- Children with rampant tooth decay can have all of their dental needs met in one visit while they are comfortably sleeping. Dentists can avoid using restraints, which are distressing for both the dentist and the child.
- Parents only need to take one day off of work instead of the five or six days required for an extended treatment plan.
- Parents can allow their children to sleep in as long as possible before the scheduled appointment time, thus avoiding some of the conflict associated with children not being able to eat or drink prior to treatment. In contrast, hospitals require that patients arrive hours ahead of the appointment to complete extensive paperwork, causing

inconvenience for the parents, boredom for the children, and unhealthy exposure to the bacteria and viruses prevalent throughout hospitals.

- Children are able to avoid the traumatic dental experiences that cause them to fear going to the dentist throughout their adult lives.
- Children who receive comprehensive dental treatment without pain or fear in one office visit will not fear subsequent visits and will experience only positive re-enforcement about their dental health. These early, pleasant dental experiences will help children enjoy regular dental check-ups and grow to look forward to routine dental treatment.

The option of providing dental treatment for children under general anesthesia in the familiar setting of their own dentist's office is becoming more and more assessable to parents in today's society. As a dentist anesthesiologist, I have dedicated my "Anesthesia for Little People" practice to providing quality anesthesia care for my patients; relieving any fear or discomfort, and helping them achieve a positive experience during dental treatment.

However, access to this care is often not available to the children who need it the most because of their parents' limited financial resources. Although in-office general anesthesia is considerably less expensive overall than other alternatives, it can be too costly for many low-income families. Because it is not an insurance-covered benefit, parents have to pay out-of-pocket for these services, and many cannot afford to do so. Many worthy children must continue to suffer until funds become available to help their parents obtain the treatment they desperately need.

It is my goal to raise public awareness of the dental needs facing so many of our children and to create a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to provide assistance to needy parents so their children can have increased access to dental care utilizing general anesthesia.