Guidelines for Predental Students Providing Patient Care During Clinical Experiences Abroad

Acquiring exposure to a variety of health-related clinical settings is a vital part of predental student preparation for careers in dentistry and other health professions. Many students are now taking advantage of opportunities to gain experience in foreign countries where regulations restricting the procedures that predental students can perform on patients are less stringent and often less well defined than in the United States and Canada, or existing local regulations are not fully enforced. While some predental students have had beneficial experiences through involvement in patient care activities abroad and services have been provided to people in need, the potential for harm and abuse in these situations cannot be ignored. Participation of inadequately educated and trained predental students in these situations can have negative consequences including:

- **Harm done to the patient.** Everyone's goal is to always help those in need; the first step in that direction must be to avoid causing harm. As a predental student, it may be difficult to know what might cause harm so you must carefully avoid situations where there is any possibility that you might injure or cause other harm to someone.

- **Physical harm to yourself**. Engaging in the practice of dentistry without sufficient training and protection can result in direct harm to you, as well as to the patient. Further, sponsoring organizations may not have in place plans to assist you if you contract an illness or are injured.

- **Legal issues with local authorities.** Even if a local dentist is supervising your interactions with patients or says that it is acceptable for you to perform a procedure, violation of local laws may still be a punishable offense.

- **Putting your acceptance to professional schools at risk.** Many students believe that the more in-depth clinical experience they have, the stronger their applications will be. However, taking on tasks that are beyond your training could make you look unethical, unknowledgeable about the dental profession, irresponsible to admission committees, and may diminish or eliminate your chance for acceptance into dental school.

- **The potential for being involved with a fraudulent company.** There are companies that will, for a fee, help place you in a foreign clinic. Be aware that some of these companies are in the business of making money first, and where money is to be made there will be some who do so dishonestly. Check out these companies very carefully before signing any contracts. If an agency is pushing the idea that you will actually get to practice dentistry while abroad, rather than simply observe and learn, you should have serious reservations about its ethical practices.

Predental students considering participating in an international dental service experience should review the following:

- The primary purpose of a predental student clinical experience is observation, not hands-on treatment. You are there to learn, not to treat.

- It is appropriate for predental students to provide preventive oral health education and to support the health care team by assisting in the provision of dental treatment after receiving adequate instruction. However, predental students should never engage in any activity that is considered the practice of dentistry including, but not limited to: diagnosing diseases, administering anesthesia, performing extractions or other surgical procedures, restoring teeth, placing sealants, performing prophylaxis, and making impressions.

- There will always be disparities in what individual predental students are prepared to do. Some predental students will be better prepared to take on more advanced patient care (from previous EMT training, for example) than others. Therefore, just because one of your peers has been able to successfully perform a particular task does not mean that you are also ready to undertake it as well. Be aware of your limitations and do not try to exceed them.

- Always keep the welfare of the patient foremost in your mind, not the perceived opportunity for proving yourself to an admissions committee. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were in the place of a patient and a person with no significant healthcare education was about to perform a procedure on you. If this thought makes you feel uncomfortable, it is probably not an appropriate task for you to be doing.

- Predental students should also be aware that it is not necessary to travel abroad to serve those in need. There are many opportunities to help the disadvantaged and other underserved groups in the U.S. There are likely many worthwhile volunteer opportunities in your community, with many more around the country. Dental schools may be more impressed with what you can do to help close to home rather than while abroad.

Adapted with permission from policies developed at Hendrix College, Conway, Arkansas by Mark Sutherland, Ph.D., Professor of Biology

Approved by ADEA Board of Directors, June 2010