UAB opens new dental clinic to care for underserved kids

The UAB School of Dentistry has opened a new pediatric clinic to better serve patients with Medicaid and Alabama’s All Kids health insurance program and expand its annual Give Kids a Smile event to a year-round offering. UAB Pediatric Dentistry at Cahaba Valley offers a variety of services, including cleanings, fillings, crowns and other restorative services. The clinic, located south of Birmingham off Valleydale Road in North Shelby County, is open Tuesdays and can accommodate 20 to 30 patients each day.

“We provide the highest quality children’s dental care, but many people can’t access us downtown,” said pediatric dentist and clinic Director Stephen C. Mitchell, D.M.D. “We wanted to make the quality of UAB Dentistry accessible.”

Mitchell said research reveals 75 percent of dental decay occurs in 25 percent of the population, and most of this 25 percent are from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Often this reflects the difficulty families have in accessing high-quality nutrition or that parents may be unaware of simple things that can reduce a child’s risk of developing cavities, he said.

“Preventing and treating dental disease for a child requires a team approach, and parents are critical to the process,” he said. “At UAB Pediatric Dentistry at Cahaba Valley, we invite parents to be part of the process. We do not want simply to fix a cavity or clean teeth; we also want to empower parents to provide the best oral health care for their child.”

Mitchell said so far, the clinic has seen mostly healthy patients seeking preventive care, though they have treated cavities and several dental abscesses. If a child needs more extensive care, a referral is made.
“If a patient needs more advanced care or requires sedation, we can make arrangements for treatment at our clinic at Children’s of Alabama,” Mitchell said. “Also, braces and other orthodontic care can be provided at our clinics in the School of Dentistry.”

Mitchell said the clinic staff includes UAB dental professionals, graduate dentists receiving specialty training and students in their third and fourth year of dental education.

“It is important for dental students and residents to become experienced with the technical side of dentistry during their training, but they also need to connect with their patients and understand the diverse backgrounds of Alabama patients,” Mitchell said. “Smaller, community-centered clinics like this enable students to develop both aspects of their professional skills.”

The clinic, he said, is an outgrowth of the school’s involvement with Cahaba Valley Healthcare (CVHC), a not-for-profit organization that provides dental and optometry services for many disadvantaged adults in the Jefferson/North Shelby areas. CVHC has worked with UAB on many events, including Give Kids a Smile, and many School of Dentistry faculty volunteer with CVHC.

“While volunteering, Noel Childers, the chair of Pediatric Dentistry, had the idea that since Cahaba Valley only uses its clinic on weekends and only provides care for adults, we should offer care for children during the week,” Mitchell said.

Mitchell said future plans include adding more appointment days and looking for clinical opportunities in other communities.

“As the patient base expands, we will expand our days of operation,” he said. “We see community-based clinics as a key part of our department’s future for affecting Birmingham and the surrounding communities.”