Until recently, oral health warranted little attention in most nursing and medical curricula. Times have changed, thanks to growing awareness of the importance of oral health in overall systemic health—and to the realization that primary care clinicians play an important role in preventing oral health problems early on.

The College of Nursing has a strong interprofessional focus—which, added to its alliance with NYU College of Dentistry—has led to a number of boundary-stretching initiatives to build collaboration and understanding across the health care professions.

During spring and summer 2014, 20 NYU family nurse practitioner (FNP) students participated in an interprofessional pediatric oral health clerkship with their dental and medical student colleagues. The experience was part of the College’s three-year Teaching Oral-Systemic Health (TOSH) program, funded by the U.S. Human Resources and Services Administration to help address the significant unmet oral health care needs of millions of children nationwide.

As in prior collaborative learning opportunities, the objective was twofold: to teach specific oral health care competencies and at the same time to promote teamwork and mutual understanding of each profession’s primary care role.

“Historically, physicians and nurse practitioners have looked at the back of throat but ignore the teeth, gums, and tongue,” says Erin Hartnett, DNP ’11, APRN-BC, CPNP, TOSH program director. The goal of the clerkship is to teach primary care providers to perform oral assessment, recognize abnormalities and oral-systemic connections, educate patients and families in oral health promotion and prevention of problems, and refer to a dentist when needed.

“Oral health is an essential part of training that’s not usually available at nursing or medical school,” says Malay Mathur, DDM, a second-year pediatric dentistry resident at NYU College of Dentistry, who led one of the clerkship teams. “Nurses and physicians should know how to recognize cavities and the condition of the tongue and mucosa, so that they can make a referral if necessary.”

Mathur notes that nurse practitioners and physicians must educate parents about preventing cavities through good nutrition and oral hygiene practices and inform them about the importance of bringing their infants to the dentist by their first birthday.

During the half-day clerkships, teams of FNP, dental, and medical students worked together with a pediatric dental resident in the Bellevue pediatric dental clinic. Team members collaborated in reviewing patients’ charts and taking their histories; conducting head, neck, and oral examinations; applying fluoride varnish; and providing anticipatory guidance to the parents.
The student teams identified a number of lesions and cavities, and students saw clearly the need to talk to families about tooth brushing and about the risks of sugary drinks and candy. One child needed to be referred to an orthodontist.

NYU College of Nursing has changed the traditional HEENT exam, which covers the head, eyes, ears, nose, and throat, to HEENOT, so students cannot forget the oral cavity. This past spring, the College also brought together the College’s 100 NP preceptors for a daylong intensive workshop to enhance their oral health knowledge and assessment skills.

Simone Teodoro, MBA, BS, RN, a second-year FNP student, left the clerkship feeling confident about her ability to identify cavities. She says that she had not learned anything about oral health before coming to NYU, and was thrilled to have this opportunity.

“In just the five years since I became a nurse, there’s been growing awareness of the role of oral health in nursing,” Teodoro says. “You can see its importance in chronic illnesses. If we can determine when a patient needs to see the dentist, we can really help that person.”

Ravi Vaswani, the third-year medical student who teamed with Mathur, Teodoro, and dental student Allison Fisch, says, “Working with Simone, the FNP student, helped me see some of the practical aspects of oral and systemic health. We had a patient with asthma, and she was able to advise the patient that she should rinse her mouth after using the inhaler, because the medication residue can lead to problems in the mouth.”

Vaswani was surprised by the similarity of approaches among the three professions, in terms of taking a history and conducting an oral exam. “Each discipline brings a different perspective on how to approach the patient. When I communicate with dentists or nurses in the future, I’ll know what is important to them in terms of caring for the patient.”

“In the Bellevue Pediatric Dental Clinic, student team members took patients’ histories; conducted head, neck, and oral examinations; applied fluoride varnish; and provided anticipatory guidance to parents.”

— RAVI VASWANI