

## A REWARDING EXPERIENCE HONORING VETERANS

Giving of our time and efforts is embodied in the ideals of the Pierre Fauchard Academy. It is also embodied in the program set up by Dr. Theresa Cheng to help deployed veterans and their families. Inspired and deeply moved by an article in *The Seattle Times* about a local and recently severely injured deployed veteran, Dr. Theresa Cheng knew she had to help veterans by helping their families.

Dr. Cheng started a new program in 2008 with a day of free dental care in her office for spouses or parents supporting and caring for injured deployed veterans. This then expanded to serve injured deployed veterans themselves, then grew again to include low-income veterans who had served in conflict or war zones. Unless designated 100% service-connected disabled, these veterans are not eligible for free dental care through the VA, making this a truly impactful initiative. While most States already have great programs to help veterans gain access to dental care, these frequently mainly address urgent care. As such, our low-income deployed veterans often go from one urgent need to the next. Dr. Cheng's program helps to provide veterans with additional options.

Realizing that to maintain good dental health it was important to have a dentist near the veteran, Dr. Cheng sought to expand the program and dentists were asked if they would participate and provide care. One of the first to do so was Dr. Barry Feder, President-elect of the Pierre Fauchard Academy. By 2013, more than 200 dentists participated in the program, each treating one qualified veteran each year with somewhat comprehensive care, in the comfort of their

offices. Some dentists have requested to treat more than one veteran in a year. It is tremendously healing and reassuring for the veterans to get cared for in their own communities.

Most veterans treated in the program were in Washington State, until recently, when the program started to spread as a result of requests from needy deployed and the willingness of dentists in other States to participate. The hope has been to provide the veterans with both dental care and peace of mind for their dental health. In some cases, mainly preventative treatment is provided, while in others more extensive care is required including restorative and other treatment. Specialists often collaborate with dentists to complete the care for these veterans. The dentist may also talk to his/her laboratory about donated labwork. The response and feedback received from veterans treated through the program has been heartfelt.

*"Thank you so much for your support of all the Veterans and their wives and families. I feel blessed and hope you know we appreciate your kindness and giving."*

*"I speak for myself that I feel not many people are able to help a veteran and sometimes we just feel like no one is there for us. This really has made me see things in a different light. Thank you for extending a helping hand."*

*"I need to say thank you. Life has been very complicated after combat, and I have had issues holding jobs to get any type of benefit. This is a big deal for me and my wife, thank you."*

Many of the veterans treated highlight how much healthier they feel after their dental treatment, how they can eat vegetables now and how this experience restores their belief in humanity. Most of the veterans being served tend to be more conscious of dental health and more highly functioning. Veterans are screened first to make sure they are eligible, then given a volunteer dentist to go to and receive care. From expe-

rience, veterans treated stay with the practice where they have received donated care, have referred patients as well, and are encouraged to pay for subsequent maintenances to become regular paying patients when circumstances change. This program has really illustrated the importance of dental health and the healing power of the doctor/patient relationship.

### *Call to Action for Fellows*

As this program expands, more care is being provided and more help is needed. However, it takes tremendous effort to find volunteer dentists when your network is in one location. Due to the growth of the program, PFA is providing a network of dentists nationwide, rather than there being a network of dentists only in the Pacific Northwest where Dr. Cheng's program began.

We are bringing this worthwhile program to the attention of Section Chairs and Fellows in the Pierre Fauchard Academy in the hope that this would help to expand Dr. Cheng's program and provide a networking vehicle to recruit more volunteers for dental care for qualified veterans and their families. Many volunteer dentists have reported that they really enjoyed the opportunity to help a veteran and that this was a deeply rewarding experience for them and their staff, as well as being beneficial for the practice. This is also an easy, convenient way for dentists to give back.

If you are interested in participating in this worthwhile program and giving back to the community by helping a veteran, more information can be found at [www.serveourvets.weebly.com](http://www.serveourvets.weebly.com). Dr. Cheng's program will be available through Section Chairs as a new point of contact. Section Chairs will receive information from Dr. Cheng when a veteran living in that Section's area needs help, and can then ask a Fellow in that area to participate in the program. If you are asked to participate, please do, you will find it to be a rewarding experience.

Dr. Cheng may also be contacted by email (with the header 'Veteran Program' in the title please, to help identify your purpose) at [drcheng2014@gmail.com](mailto:drcheng2014@gmail.com).



**Dr. Cheng (R) with a veteran.**