Historically, orthodontics has not been part of routine comprehensive dental care in charity clinics. Rather, their primary focus has been the elimination of caries and dental infections through basic restorative treatment and extractions. In some locations, preventative treatments such as prophylaxis, fluoride treatment, and dental sealants are also available. Orthodontic care is viewed as a specialty treatment, and therefore is above and beyond the missions of most charity clinics. It is all too often thought of as a cosmetic option reserved only for those who can afford it.

For those of us who have first-hand experience working with underserved patients, we see our share of severe malocclusions, cleft palates, and congenitally missing teeth. We also see a great need for orthodontics; we know that an attractive smile can help remedy the low self-esteem that is so often exhibited by children from low-income households. However, all too often we are left wondering what to do with the increasing number of indigent children who desperately need orthodontic treatment. We are forced to call upon our orthodontic colleagues and ask them to donate their services and time, and they usually do. We find solace in helping a handful of patients who are able to receive pro bono orthodontics; however, we are left to wonder about the rest of our patients who are not fortunate enough to be among those chosen few.

Feed, Clothe, House and Heal

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul was founded in Paris in 1833 with the mission of serving the poor. Presently, there are ministries in almost every state, and in 149 countries. The St. Vincent de Paul campus, situated in the heart of a huge dentally underserved population in South Phoenix, has answered the challenge in a big way. The mission of this charity is to feed, clothe, house, and heal those in need. The medical and dental clinics represent the healing component. One striking need within this population has been orthodontics for the children.

Dr. Ken Snyder, dental director of the St. Vincent de Paul Dental Clinic in South Phoenix, is a tireless patient advocacy leader who has been providing charity dental care for over 30 years. He shares his thoughts on this dilemma: “As we completed routine dental care on these kids, I would write on their charts “treatment complete,” but in my heart I knew this was far from true. It really bothered me.” Initially, Dr. Snyder contacted local orthodontists; many were willing to take on a few pro bono cases each year, but what initially seemed like a ray of hope became clouded due to transportation problems. Many of the families did not own cars, and their reliance on public transportation to visit offices distant from their neighborhoods often led to missed appointments.

Dr. Don Sanchez, former director of the orthodontic residency program at A.T. Still University in
Mesa, AZ, worked with Dr. Snyder to form a symbiotic solution. Dr. Sanchez has a heart the size of Texas, and together he and Dr. Snyder orchestrated a program whereby A.T. Still orthodontic residents were able to visit the clinic two days a month to provide treatment for the underserved.

It was a win-win-win situation. The patients benefited from getting the orthodontic treatments they desperately needed but couldn’t afford. The residents were exposed to a public health setting and some very challenging cases, and Dr. Snyder was able to write “treatment complete” on the charts and it was true.

In 2008, Dr. Jae Hyun Park took over as director of the postgraduate orthodontic residency program of the Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health. He too, has been a saint; he has embraced the mission of advocating for the underserved. Dr. Park has truly been a dedicated visionary in incorporating orthodontics as a part of a comprehensive dental treatment plan for the disadvantaged.

Another face on the St. Vincent de Paul Dental Clinic’s Mount Rushmore is that of Dr. Cliff Running, adjunct orthodontic professor at the Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health, who joyfully and tirelessly mentors the residents at the clinic two Tuesdays per month. The St. Vincent de Paul clinic gets no government funding and survives solely on grants and donations both financial and material.

Part of the success of the orthodontic program can be attributed to the very high percentage of patients who keep their appointments. This is partially due to the fact that although the St. Vincent de Paul Dental Clinic is a free clinic, a fee is charged for orthodontic treatment. Parents must pay $500 at the beginning of treatment and a minimal charge at each appointment. Experience has taught us that treatment is more valued and compliance much greater when parents invest financially in their child’s treatment. Grants can be awarded to families with more than one child receiving treatment.

So Many Benefits

The importance of a smile cannot be overstated. It has been proven that aesthetically pleasing smiles provide many advantages in life such as greater self-confidence, being perceived as more intelligent, and even having a better chance of getting a job. Straight teeth also translate into a healthier smile and a healthier human being. Teeth that are in proper alignment function better and are easier to maintain, making it easier to stave off periodontal disease and other dental ailments in the future.

Thus far, the St. Vincent de Paul Dental Clinic has provided comprehensive orthodontics to over 400 children. Because of the vision, determination, and collaboration of the people mentioned above, patients at the clinic are smiling and showing off their braces. I hope that this knowledge will inspire other orthodontic and residency programs around the country, or even around the world, to reach out to the less fortunate in their communities.

“When love and skill come together, expect a miracle!” This saying paints a true picture of achieving what was thought to be impossible: the incorporation of orthodontics into a charity clinic’s comprehensive treatment plan.