



Every smile is special: Healthy Athletes Special Smiles Program makes a difference

*Fenton SJ, **Perlman SP, ***Oredugba FA

*Department of Pediatric Dentistry,
University of Texas Dental Branch, Houston, Texas, USA

**Department of Pediatric Dentistry, Boston University
Goldman School of Dental Medicine, USA

***Department of Child Dental Health,
College of Medicine, University of Lagos, Nigeria

*Correspondence: Fenton SJ

E-mail: sfenton@utm.edu

A smiling face on an individual can represent someone who may be happy, thankful or witnessing something that may strike them as being funny. But a smile could also denote a person with a positive self-image and self-esteem, personal well-being, or an individual with good overall health including good dental health free from pain or infection. Everyone deserves an opportunity to smile including the 190 million people worldwide with intellectual disabilities, along with the 2.5 million Special Olympics athletes competing in sports events locally, nationally, regionally and globally who live in many countries and counting the 6,374 Nigerian athletes who competed in Nigeria Special Olympics events in 2007. Unfortunately, many Special Olympics athletes as well as other individuals with intellectual disabilities are unable to access needed and often medically necessary dental care. This unmet care can cause significant oral pain and infection of both their dentition and supporting soft tissues which, if left untreated could result in considerable morbidity or death.

The Special Olympics Special Smiles Program (SOSS) is trying to change worldwide the recognized inadequate access to comprehensive dental care for people with intellectual disabilities by providing educational and training programs for dentists, dental hygienists, dental students, dental hygiene students, dental educators, community leaders and government officials.

The development of the SOSS Program

The SOSS Program was initiated and developed in 1993 by a pediatric dentist in Lynn, Massachusetts, USA, Dr. Steven Perlman, who recognized the inability of people with intellectual disabilities to access medically necessary comprehensive dental care. He envisioned a program that would provide Special Olympics athletes with oral screenings, personal oral hygiene instruction, nutritional counseling, and mouth guards for athletes competing in contact sports, and dental reports to be sent home. These reports identify urgent and non-urgent dental care needs and provide additional oral health information and a list of local dental practitioners willing to treat individuals with intellectual disabilities in their offices. The first ever SOSS Program was held on the campus of Harvard University in Boston, Massachusetts during the Massachusetts Special Olympics Track and Field Competition in June 1993. Six hundred and eighteen athletes received dental screenings and were accessed into the health care system during that inaugural event. Following the success of that initial

program, many additional Special Smiles events were hosted by other Special Olympics U.S. state programs during the 1990s decade. The Special Smiles Program joined with the Opening Eyes and Healthy Hearing Programs in 1999 to formally become recognized as one of the health care disciplines of the newly formed Special Olympics Healthy Athletes Initiative. This new initiative expanded the scope of the SOSS Program by financially supporting the selection and training of dedicated dental health professionals to become Special Smiles Directors who would receive the didactic and clinical instruction necessary to develop and operate their own local Special Smiles Program.

February 2001 saw another major milestone achieved for the Healthy Athletes Special Smiles Program. The Surgeon General of the United States was invited to attend the Special Olympics World Winter Games in Anchorage, Alaska. He witnessed firsthand the extraordinary level of dental disease suffered by Special Olympics athletes from around the world. Thirteen percent of the athletes screened during those World Winter Games presented with oral pain, a level which is still observed by dental professionals providing oral screenings no matter where the athletes live or compete. In response to the significant disparity in access to appropriate and medically necessary health care, the Surgeon General convened a conference on health care disparity and intellectual disability in December 2001. The findings from that conference revealed that dental care was the greatest unmet health care need for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The conference findings were published in *Closing the Gap: A National Blueprint for Improving the Health of Individuals with Mental Retardation*. Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Health Disparities and Mental Retardation.⁽¹⁾

The Surgeon General's Report dramatically increased the public and professional awareness of the health care plight suffered by children and adults with intellectual and/or other disabilities. This inability to access necessary medical and dental health care was recognized as a worldwide problem⁽²⁾. In response, the Healthy Athletes Special Smiles Program initiated a global awareness campaign identifying dental health professionals throughout the world including Nigeria for selective training as Special Smiles Clinical Directors. These individuals received didactic and clinical instruction through a Special Olympics Healthy Athletes Train the Trainer Program held at several sites around the world including Panama, Austria, The

Cayman Islands, Mexico, Canada, U.S. sites (San Diego, Utah, Florida), and the World Summer Games in Dublin, Ireland in 2003, the World Winter Games in Nagano, Japan in 2005, Johannesburg, South Africa in 2006 and most recently the World Games in Shanghai, China in 2007. Healthy Athletes data collected during the 2003 World Summer Games revealed that the number of Special Olympics athletes with untreated decay, gingival disease, and missing teeth was 35%, 53% and 34% respectively. In addition, 58% of the athletes were identified to be in need of either urgent or non-urgent dental care⁽³⁾.

The SOSS Nigeria Program

The Special Smiles advocacy campaign to mobilize the world's dental professionals to accept their ethical responsibility to provide comprehensive and medically necessary dental care for individuals of all ages with intellectual disabilities is beginning to demonstrate promising potential. Over 170 Special Smiles events were recorded for 2007 including five events that were held in the following locations in Nigeria: Sagamu, Ogun State; Lagos, Lagos State; Jos, Plateau State; Ilesa, Osun State; and Ibadan, Oyo State (**Table 1**). This past year, 915 Nigerian athletes received the benefits of an oral screening, nutritional counseling and oral hygiene instruction provided by 49 Nigerian Special Olympics dental professional volunteers. While this is a good beginning, it represents only 14% of the total 6,374 Nigerian athletes in need of this beneficial service. The volunteers participating in these Special Smiles Events were the beneficiaries of the overwhelming outpouring of affection bestowed upon them by those athletes fortunate enough to be screened and helped (Figure 1). Smiles could be seen on the faces of athletes and volunteers alike. More volunteers are necessary to insure that every athlete is screened and referred for appropriate and medically necessary dental care. Volunteers report that their professional interaction with the Special Olympics athletes has been one of the most rewarding experiences of their lives. The true barometer of a society's ethical and moral values is the way it treats its most vulnerable members: its children, elderly citizens, socio-economically disadvantaged citizens and persons with developmental or other disabilities^(4,5). You can make a significant difference in the life of a Special Olympics Nigerian athlete by volunteering for the screening events. The act of smiling is truly infectious and heartwarming no matter who is doing the smiling. Every smile is special (**Figures 1-4**).

Table 1. Summary of Special Olympics Special Smiles Nigeria 2007 Screenings

Location	No of Athletes Screened	No of Volunteers
Sagamu, Ogun State	221	11
Lagos, Lagos State	129	9
Jos, Plateau State	140	10
Ilesa, Osun State	244	10
Ibadan, Oyo State	181	9
Total	915	49



Figure 1. Special Smiles Volunteers during training session



Figure 2. Volunteers at registration desk



Figure 3. Special Smiles Volunteer during Screening



Figure 4. Volunteer giving oral health education to an athlete.



Figure 5. Special Smiles Volunteers at the end of Screening

References

1. U.S. Public Health Service. Closing the Gap: A National Blueprint for Improving the Health of Individuals with Mental Retardation. Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Health Disparities and Mental Retardation. February 2002. Washington, DC.
2. Oredugba FA. Use of oral health care services and oral findings in children with special needs in Lagos, Nigeria. *Spec Care Dentist* 2006; 26:59-65.
3. Special Olympics Research. 2003 Special Olympics World Summer Games Healthy Athletes Screening Data. Special Olympics, 2005. www.specialolympics.org/Special+Olympics+Public+Website/English/Initiatives/Research/Health_Research/Healthy+Athletes+Screening+Data.htm. Accessed January 21, 2008.
4. Fenton SJ. People with disabilities need more than lip service. *Spec Care Dentist* 1999; 19(5): 198-199.
5. Fenton SJ. If Only We All Cared. *J Dent Educ* 2004; 68(3): 304-305.

Sanford J Fenton, DDS, MDS is the North America Clinical Advisor for the Special Olympics Special Smiles Program and is Professor and Chair of the Department of Pediatric Dentistry at the University of Texas Dental Branch in Houston, Texas, USA.

Steven P Perlman, DDS, MScD is Senior Global Clinical Director for the Special Olympics Special Smiles Program and is Associate Clinical Professor of Pediatric Dentistry at the Boston University Goldman School of Dental Medicine. His private pediatric dentistry practice is in Lynn, Massachusetts, USA.

Folakemi A Oredugba, BDS, FWACS, MPH, M SND RCSEd is Nigeria's Clinical Director for the Special Olympics Special Smiles Program and is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Child Dental Health, College of Medicine, University of Lagos and Honorary Consultant, Lagos University Teaching Hospital, Lagos, Nigeria.