

It's our duty!

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How would you react to this situation? Your 12-year-old daughter is playing on a select soccer team. Her teammates come from various schools in your city and also from the surrounding suburbs. These girls have 1 thing in common—they are all good soccer players. In fact, they just won the regional tournament and will play at the state level in 2 weeks. Your daughter has become friends with one of the girls on the team from a neighboring community. At the regional tournament, you took some pictures of the girls after the game, including a close-up of your daughter with this young girl.

When you look closely at the picture, you notice that this friend of your daughter has very crowded teeth, with blocked-out maxillary canines. Her smile is definitely compromised by her malaligned teeth. She could benefit from orthodontic treatment. So you ask your daughter why her friend has not had orthodontics. Your daughter states that this girl's parents are divorced, she has 2 younger brothers who also need "braces," and her mother simply does not have the money to afford orthodontic treatment for her daughter. What would you do in this situation? Would you offer pro-bono treatment? Are you aware of the systems already established in your area to treat less fortunate children?

There are several ways that your daughter's friend might receive donated orthodontic treatment. First, most orthodontists are willing to provide treatment for underprivileged children. I've done this for many years. But the problem that most of us experience is that we do not know who should qualify for this type of treatment. And some of us have provided pro-bono care to a family, only to learn later that the family has 3 cars, 4 flat-screen televisions, and regularly takes summer trips to exotic places. These situations tend to sour our interest in providing donated services. So, what we need is a nonbiased screening service that identifies who qualifies financially for pro-bono orthodontic treatment. Actually, those screening services already exist.

One of the first programs to be developed is "Smiles Change Lives." This organization was started in 1997 in

Kansas City as the Virginia Brown Community Orthodontic Partnership. It was organized to provide orthodontic treatment for children from low-income families. It eventually gained commercial sponsorship from 3M. Since 1997, more than 1200 underserved children have been treated through this program. It is now active in all 50 states, and you can use its services to screen potential candidates to determine whether they qualify financially.

A second method of determining whether a family qualifies for orthodontic services is "Smile for a Lifetime." This program was established in 2008 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and has obtained sponsorship from Ormco to offset its administration costs. It is a nonprofit, charitable organization comprising local chapters throughout the country that provide quality orthodontic treatment for underprivileged children. The foundation helps equip orthodontists with the resources necessary to develop a local board of directors that will specifically select patients for orthodontic treatment.

A third program was started recently as a pilot in a few states with the help of seed money donated by the AAO. This screening system is called Donated Orthodontic Services (DOS) and has been functioning for about a year in Kansas, Illinois, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. The DOS program also enables orthodontists to reach out to vulnerable patients who desperately need orthodontic care they cannot afford. The coordinators of the program in the various states act as the liaison between the orthodontist's staff and the patient to facilitate the treatment.

So now you know. There are at least 3 methods of determining whether a family would qualify financially for donated orthodontics. Have you become involved yet? Are you treating the less fortunate in your community? If not, why not? We all need to play a part in this noble service. It's our duty!

