



Wayne Lipschitz

A special dentist for people who need special care

BY JULIE KIRKWOOD

When dentist Wayne Lipschitz heads home after a Friday in the operating room, he's exhausted. This is his one day of the week to clean and repair the teeth of people whose developmental disabilities are so severe that they could not be treated in a regular dental office.

Because Medicaid pays for most of these patients, Lipschitz earns little money for his efforts. Financially, he would be much better off—and his feet would hurt a lot less from long hours of standing and working with sometimes uncooperative patients—if he spent his Fridays working in his regular practice.

Yet he considers Fridays the best day of the week. "I love the reward that I get out of it," he says.

The waiting list to see him in the operating room at Strong Memorial Hospital has about 250 names—so many that it can take two or three years for a new patient to be seen. Patients come to Rochester from hours away because so few dentists provide this service.

"These are people like 300-pound autistic guys who are severely developmentally disabled, who won't let you near

them, who want to fight and attack," Lipschitz says. "I can tell you the stories of many rugby matches in the operating rooms."

There are also patients like Janelle Wolff, 21, of Chili, who loves the wheelchair ride at the hospital and the stuffed animal she gets from the nurses. Wolff was born with a rare genetic disorder called Dubowitz syndrome that causes developmental delays, blindness, hyperextended joints and a small jaw.

Sherree Wolff, Janelle's mother, ranks Lipschitz among the best of her daughter's many caregivers.

"We absolutely adore him," she says. "When he comes into the room, he looks right at Janelle. He addresses her and he talks to her. ... It doesn't matter that she may not fully comprehend ... He's giving her the same respect as he does any other patient."

Lipschitz, 52, has been treating developmentally disabled patients at Strong since 1997, when he took over from another dentist who was leaving. It was a job passed on to him largely because he was the new guy on faculty at the University of Rochester's Eastman Institute for Oral Health. But he has never seen it that way.

"It just became a story of, I was the guy in the right place at the right time to look into treating this population."

Lipschitz grew up in Cape Town, South Africa, where the coldest day he can remember was maybe 45 or 50 degrees. He came to Rochester for a residency at the Eastman Institute for Oral Health when he was 25. A few years later he convinced his new wife to move here, just for a couple years.

Two decades later, they haven't left. At least once a year they make the 15-hour trip to South Africa so their two teenage children can stay connected with family back home.

"One of the reasons I stayed is because of the developmentally disabled population," Lipschitz says. He says he can't remember ever feeling uncomfortable with a severely disabled patient he was treating.

Lipschitz treats patients who have autism, intellectual disabilities, birth defects, traumatic brain injuries and even Alzheimer's disease. Often they come to him because the patient's parent or caregiver notices signs of pain that they suspect is related to their teeth, but the patient can't verbalize what hurts.

"I have parents who are crying," Lipschitz says. "And this is why I find it rewarding, because they're so happy that we've been able to do something."

Sherree Wolff remembers crying at the first appointment, when she found out Janelle would most likely lose all her teeth eventually. She felt embarrassed for crying and apologized. Considering everything Janelle's been through, it seemed silly to cry over teeth.

"He immediately came right over, put his arm around me and he said 'Absolutely not.' He said, 'People don't realize, but your smile is part of your identity, and that is something you need to come to terms with, that you might lose that part of her.'"

While many patients sit back calmly during surgery preparations, this can be physical work for Lipschitz, the nurses and anesthesiology staff. They sometimes get scratched, punched or bitten.

"I've had patients that have taken all their clothes off and run around the floors of the hospital," Lipschitz says. "Me chasing naked people through the operating room—you kind of think it's funny in hindsight. But it is what it is."

Once, a patient who seemed fine was down the hospital

**"Your smile is part
of your identity."**

stairs and running toward the parking garage before anybody could do anything.

"That's out of our jurisdiction," Lipschitz says. "We're not allowed to go and tackle him in the garage."

Generally, though, the appreciation of patients and their caregivers is overwhelming. "I have patients that want to hug you and they won't let go," Lipschitz says.

Daniel Barletta, a dentist in private practice in Greece who helps Lipschitz work through the waiting list, says it's difficult but rewarding work, and Lipschitz does it well.

"He's an excellent doctor," Barletta says. "I know the other staff that work with him at the hospital all love him."

Richard Speisman, who does similar work at Rochester General Hospital, where he is chair of the dentistry department, also speaks highly of Lipschitz.

"He's very concerned," Speisman says, "very caring about all of his patients and just a pleasure to work with."

Speisman, who will retire in a few years, says he worries about who will take over when dentists like Lipschitz and himself are no longer able to treat special-needs patients. As far as he knows, Strong and Rochester General are the only ones in upstate New York with formal programs.

"We have very few dentists who have the training and the interest to manage these patients in the operating room," Speisman says.

So to help increase capabilities, plans are underway to create a new clinic at the Eastman Institute for Oral Health for special-needs patients, which could take some patients off Lipschitz's long waiting list.

Meanwhile, Lipschitz plans to keep treating his patients for as long as he can. The variety of patients, the challenge of figuring out how to care for them and the pleasure of helping them is worth it, he says. Plus, he keeps a pair of comfy Dansko shoes in the corner of his office to help with the sore feet after a long day.

Sammy Watson

and field athletes. In the trials, she placed third in her heat and 24th overall. "It's kind of close," she says of her time, adding that "I'm still learning the basics."

She's also the reigning national champion in the under-20