

# U<sub>OF</sub>T DENTISTRY



# GREAT ALUMNI



Twelve UofT Dentistry grads who have made an indelible impact on the profession in Canada – and the world ▶ [PAGE 9](#)



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# The Caregiver

## DR. KATHERINE ZETTLER

While at UofT, she discovered an affinity for treating special-needs patients. They've been an important part of her practice ever since

BY PAUL FRAUMENI

It's just before 8 a.m. on a cold Monday morning in December, and patients are already checking in to the dental clinic on the second floor of Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto. Many are in wheelchairs and accompanied by parents or caregivers. It's a busy place.

Dr. Katherine Zettler, 37, of Dip Paedo is here every Monday and Friday, working with a team of specialists and UofT Dentistry students as they care for people with health conditions that require special attention. Some patients have mental challenges, such as a developmental delay or Alzheimer's disease, and might have trouble understanding a dentist's instructions, explains Zettler. Others need a clinic that can accommodate wheelchairs. Or a patient might have a mouth lesion that an oral pathologist should assess. "They need an environment like the dentistry clinic at Mount Sinai, where we offer an integrated medical model," she says.

Zettler discovered her affinity for this kind of dentistry as a UofT student, while participating in a supervised program that allowed her to work with patients with special needs. "Some of the students weren't comfortable working with these patients," she says, "but I found that I had no fear. That's when I began to think this area might be my niche."

Years later, Zettler came to a deeper understanding of the unique care these patients require when her mother was confined to a wheelchair. "It was often difficult even to accommodate her wheelchair in restaurants," says Zettler. "This experience of seeing how my own mother was becoming marginalized helped me to understand the challenges so many people face."

Zettler believes in helping to reverse these hardships for her patients in the Mount Sinai dentistry clinic and the families she serves in Iqaluit, where she works



in a hospital clinic for several weeks a year. Many families in Iqaluit have access-to-care issues, she says.

In 2008, Zettle established the Margaret and Clifford Zettle Award at the Faculty of Dentistry. She named the award for her parents because, she says, they inspired her and her brothers. “My mom worked for me in my own clinic in her later years and always demonstrated real compassion for my patients who had special challenges.” The award enables a student to provide care for people with disabilities as part of a month-long placement at one of the Faculty’s affiliated teaching hospitals. Last year, Zettle added to her giving to allow a second student to benefit from the same opportunity.

“In a month, the student can see patients who have special healthcare conditions and get an idea of this field,” she says. “I believe it is society’s responsibility to provide everyone with the help they need. It would go a long way to making a real impact if every dentist did just a little bit of work with those less fortunate.”

- > **Most rewarding career moment:**  
Receiving a plaque from a group home for people with special needs that says: “Big smiles thanks to Dr. Zettle”
- > **Favourite thing about visiting Iqaluit:**  
Everyone is friendly and it’s very peaceful
- > **Preferred technique for making patients comfortable in the dental chair:**  
Talking about something other than dentistry