Myrtle Beach—The nation’s newest high-tech dental training facility at Horry Georgetown Technical College is giving thousands of people a new reason to smile. Computers and monitors at each of twenty-one dental treatment stations permit dental hygiene and assisting students to study patient issues and receive immediate hands-on instruction from faculty.

The new facility also benefits area dentists who, in time, hope to offer dental services at reduced fees for financially challenged patients. The initial patient emphasis will concentrate on providing preventive dental care to Horry and Georgetown children who do not have a dentist. Prof. Alice Derouen, chair of HGTC’s dental science program, said more than 3,000 patients came to the older clinic on the Conway Campus, but she expects demand for services to increase at the new facility, the Charles F. Freeman Community Dental Clinic, named for the former director of the Felburn Foundation whose contributions expanded the clinic from 12 to 21 treatment stations.

President Neyle Wilson of HGTC said the vision for the dental training facility and clinic, which vendors and suppliers have touted as “one of the most beautiful in the Southeast,” started eight years ago. “With state-of-the-art training and a new public clinic, it’s a $7.5 million investment in the people of the Waccamaw/Grand Strand Region,” Wilson said. “Over the past three years, about 1,000 students have graduated from HGTC with degrees in health sciences. With an average starting salary of $28K, that’s a direct local impact of $28 million, and indirect impact three times that, excluding the positive effects of a healthy smile.” A town that boasts more than 14 million tourists annually knows the importance of a smile extends beyond health.

But according to the Academy of General Dentistry, there is a relationship between gum (periodontal) disease and health complications such as a stroke and heart disease. The new clinic will lead dental health education efforts and forge stronger alliances with local dentists on the importance of early care.

Wilson praised HGTC dental faculty and Dr. Phil Render, dean of health science programs, a dentist and Myrtle Beach City Council member, who has worked with local dentists and governmental bodies in promoting the new facility. He also praised local citizens, who voted in 2008 for “The Education Penny,” which, along with the Myrtle Beach Air Force Base Redevelopment Authority, contributed more than $6 million to the cost of facility construction. SGA Architects designed the building, whose façade is said to resemble a smile. “In addition to our degree programs, we also hope to provide continuing education for area dental staff,” Wilson said. He agreed that more than 60 percent of dentists could seek continuing education opportunities for staff, because clinic equipment may be more advanced that some in local dental offices.
As part of their lab work, HGTC dental science students, supervised by faculty and local dentists, will provide dental cleanings and take x-rays. Dr. Render said local governments have expressed interest in expanding clinic services.

The building will open June 1, and appointments at the new clinic will be available this fall by calling (843) 349-5369.