

A Reason to Smile

Changing legislation and a tough economy can make finding dental care difficult for Dane County's low-income population. To meet the growing need, area health care providers are coming together and bringing awareness to the cause

By Emily Leas
Photographs courtesy of Wisconsin Dental Association

"He just pulled it right out!" 11-year-old Huntur Kai of Janesville exclaims in disbelief, thrusting a small plastic bag containing a tooth at his mother, Marsha.

She laughs and tousles his hair as Dr. Jorge Torres-Guzman tells her how brave her son was.

Torres-Guzman quickly recaps his 30-minute visit with Huntur, offering gentle advice to mother and son about brushing twice a day and trying to visit a dentist every six months. They are the standard reminders, but ones that aren't so easy to heed for a growing population of Wisconsinites.

This reality was on full display June 30, where Torres-Guzman was one of 395 dentists from around the state (and just one of the many local dentists) volunteering at Mission of Mercy, a program of the

Wisconsin Dental Association Foundation. The two-day event, held at the Alliant Energy Convention Center this year and annually in cities around Wisconsin, focused on providing free dental care with a high priority on treating uninsured or Medicaid patients dealing with pain or infections.

It's here that the Kais waited in line for nearly two and a half hours to nab an appointment. They are just two of the 3,595 Madison-area residents who took advantage of the \$1.75 million worth of donated care. Huntur's tooth extraction was one of 2,822 that happened during the event, along with 1,205 cleanings, 2,657 fillings and 80 root canals.

It was work that keeps dentists like Torres-Guzman busy. So with a smile, he shakes Marsha's hand and gives Hun-

tur a high five before disappearing behind screens concealing about 20 dental chairs filled with more pediatric patients.

This particular MOM event, with 200 chairs and over 1,810 volunteers, is the largest held in the U.S. thanks in part to local chair Dr. Allison Dowd.

"I've coordinated the pediatric areas of the other MOM events in Wisconsin and I really wanted to bring it to the legislators' backyard," she says.

Normally, Dowd can be found at Children's Dental Center in Middleton. Today she bounces between each area of the convention center filled with people awaiting a range of services: Anesthesia, extractions, pediatrics, cleanings, fillings, an on-site lab where partial dentures are created and a sterilization area for the hundreds of donated instruments.



“There are a lot of variables that keep people from going to the dentist, but this event is also about public awareness,” she explains. “Dentists need to come together with legislators and address the issue.”

That issue, as explained by the WDA, is raising public awareness about the barriers to dental care faced by low-income adults and children. But it’s not just money that keeps people from getting in for a check-up. Other hurdles include education level and access to dentists accepting Badger-Care, or state-funded health care, particularly in rural areas.

It’s no secret that access to health insurance and health care is a major problem for many Americans, yet it often takes an event like MOM to shed light on the issue of getting adequate dental care. When an appointment is difficult to find, or education





on oral health is lacking, dental pain or infection is often treated at home like a cold or flu. But unlike these ailments, dental pain and infections won't go away with rest and fluids. Instead, they become urgent situations when ignored.

"Last year, there were \$1.6 million in medical dental visits in emergency rooms in our area," says Dowd, pointing out the costly burden in health care dollars and the strain placed on overwhelmed hospital emergency departments. "We see that here at this event [the impact of]...swelling and injuries that went untreated. We've done more extractions than we have fillings, an indication that infections have been left too long."

Thanks to events like MOM, many are getting a one-time chance at the dental care they need—and the issue itself is brought to the forefront at a time when it's difficult for some patients to get care and for some dental practices to survive.

According to a Wisconsin dental workforce report released in 2010, 1 million low-income individuals, or 20 percent of Wisconsin residents, were beneficiaries of BadgerCare at some point in the prior year. It also indicates that about 43 percent of actively practicing Wisconsin dentists participated in the BadgerCare program, a higher percentage than in other states despite being reimbursed just \$.38 for every dollar of care provided.

Because of these low reimbursements, seeing BadgerCare patients can put a strain on the health of a private dental business, especially small practices in rural areas. According to a report published by the Oral Health Coalition of Dane County in May 2012, only about 10 percent of dentists serving Medicaid patients were accepting new patients, which can create long waiting lists and make it difficult to maintain oral health.

Dr. Amy Kramer, a colleague of Dowd's at Children's Dental Center, notes the unique position their company is in. They are a private dental practice able to accept BadgerCare. She indicates that about 30 to 50 percent of the patients seen at their three clinics are part of the program.

"We've found a successful business model that just works, and we're able to do it without shifting losses onto other patients in the practice," she says.

But not all dental practices are in a position to do so. Kramer notes that she's seen patients who have driven three hours because there is not a dentist in their town able to take BadgerCare or the waiting list is too long for an urgent need.

“Factor in the gas to get here and that some patients may need three or four visits to address their issue, and you’ve got a pretty high expense,” she explains. It’s no wonder that coming in for a routine cleaning can fall down the priority list for many.

In addition to MOM and a handful of clinics throughout Dane County, a slew of local resources have tried to make it easier for uninsured dental patients to get care. But that hasn’t kept the tides of demand from rising.

Dr. Errin Pfeiffer sees this first hand as chief dental officer for Access Community Health Centers, a string of local, non-profit health centers focused on providing services to low-income and medically underserved communities. Of their five Dane County and Dodgeville clinics, three offer dental services. She explains that as the economy has sputtered, the base of patients needing assistance has swelled.

“People are losing jobs or there’s a shift in [the type of employment] where now they work a couple of part-time jobs. All of a sudden they don’t have benefits or have decreased benefits,” she explains, adding that this has spurred the nonprofit organization to increase the number of providers and locations offering dental services.

Dr. Ken Loving, CEO of Access, reiterates the staggering increase in need.

“We treated about 2,500 patients 10 years ago and serve about 25,000 now,” he says. “We’re able to do that because of community support for what we do. We have the benefit of living in a very generous [area] that is knowledgeable about issues like this.”

While private practices and health centers such as Access find their own ways to meet this growing need, there is one key point they all agree on: Prevention and education is the key to improving our community’s oral health.

Studies have shown that oral infections are linked to diabetes, heart disease and stroke. In addition, tooth decay has become the most common chronic disease among children across the nation. According to the Dane County Oral Health report, 14.4 percent of middle schoolers surveyed said they were absent during the 2008-2009 school year due to dental pain.

Kramer explains this is why their practice starts by educating the parents of their patients and breaking it down into two simple reminders that can go a long way in creating a lifetime of oral health.

“Number one, help your child brush and floss their teeth daily. And number two, help them make healthy food choices,” she says. “Our goal is to create a dental home

for kids; a place to come regularly so we can continue to educate them...help prevent cavities and pain, and build on positive dental experiences from an early age.”

Pfeiffer seconds the goal at Access. Although, of the 9,600 dental patients Pfeiffer’s team treated in 2011, 60 percent were adults, highlighting the need for education across all ages. The Wisconsin dental workforce report notes that lower utilization rates by low-income uninsured patients is partly due to the lack of education about seeking routine oral health care.

“Education and health care are two things that are critical for people who are trying to better their situation,” says Pfeiffer. “If you don’t have either of those, it’s very difficult to get ahead in life.”

She adds that by creating a medical and dental home for both adults and children, the team at Access is able to take care of their needs and be a good partner in the community. In turn, by educating this population on the importance of not just medical health, but dental health as well, they are helping patients get ahead while relieving some of the burden on an already strained health care system.

“You go from a job with good benefits, then the economy gets bad, you get laid off, and you hope you can find care that you can afford.”

Marsha Kai

Back at the MOM event, Marsha Kai gathers her purse and a clipboard containing her and Huntur’s health information. She pauses to ponder why this free clinic was so critical for both of them.

“You go from a job with good benefits, then the economy gets bad, you get laid off, and you hope you can find care that you can afford,” she says. “And as a mom, you’re always putting your child first, but this event is great because we can both see a dentist at the same time.”

She smiles down at Huntur who is still staring at his new souvenir, and they head off for her free cleaning.

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For more information on the state of oral health in Dane County, visit wda.org or publichealthmdc.com.