



Mobile dental program fills a need in Jackson County

By Jessica Sipperley | Jackson Citizen Patr...

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Hailey Mata showed no fear of the dentist as she walked to the mobile dental station in the Hunt Elementary School library and hopped into a reclining exam chair.

The 5-year-old eagerly pulled on a pair of sunglasses offered by Dr. Suzan Ly, a dentist from the Center for Family Health. But before Ly could take a peek at her teeth, Hailey had just one request:

"Don't pull out my teeth," she said.

After Ly assured her that wasn't the plan, Hailey settled back and opened her mouth wide, and Ly leaned over the chair to count her teeth.

Hailey, a kindergartner, was one of several students who visited the **Center for Family Health** mobile dental program that day. About 78 students were signed up for Hunt's clinic, in addition to about 35 children left from the team's previous visit, said Lynsey Cook, a dental assistant from the Northeast Health Center. Ly, Cook and hygienist Jari Smith form the center's mobile dental team.

"It's everything we would normally do in the office," Ly said. "We see a lot of people who have not been to a dentist before."

More requests from schools in the county, coupled with a simplified consent form for parents, have resulted in major growth in the two-year-old program, said coordinator Charisse Green. A total of 599 children were treated from February 2007 through 2008, compared to 1,023 children seen so far in 2009, she said.

An exam at the mobile clinic usually takes 20 to 30 minutes, which is less time than traveling to and seeing a dentist outside school, she said.

"At some schools last year, we saw 30 to 40 students," Green said. "This year, we saw 80 to 90. We think if we didn't go to them, they wouldn't come to us."

The mobile clinics offer dental exams, fluoride treatment, X-rays for new patients ages 6 and older, and sealants, which are plastic coatings that protect teeth from decay. At the clinic, Ly counted each patient's teeth, looking for decay and previous dental work, and Smith chronicled the observations.

After Lillian Vogel, 6, had her teeth examined, Smith draped a green cloth over her and took X-rays with a handheld machine.

"Last year, I was scared. Now, I'm not scared about it anymore," said Lillian, a first-grader.

Each student receives a toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss and a letter that lists the day's treatment and recommendations for follow-up care, such as a filling or an extraction.

The follow-up can be performed at the Center for Family Health Dental Office, 817 W. High St., or the



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Arieyan Clark, a second-grader at Hunt Elementary School, has an X-ray taken of her mouth to check for cavities with the Center for Family Health's mobile dental program. The program was set up in the school's library.

Northeast Health Center, 1024 Fleming Ave., Ly said.

Ly, Smith and Cook primarily travel to elementary schools, but the center has held clinics at secondary schools, the Salvation Army and vacation Bible schools, among other locations. If the dental professionals do not examine all registered children, they return at a later date to finish.

The mobile program treats insured and uninsured children, as well as those on Medicaid, Green said. Medicaid covers more-serious procedures, such as tooth extraction, she said. The center also has a sliding fee scale to offset treatment costs for low-income patients who qualify.

Grants from several groups, including 100 Women Who Care, the Rotary Club of Jackson and the Hancock Fund, have enabled the mobile dental program to purchase key equipment, including the handheld X-ray machine, Green said.

The program has not received funding from sources other than grants.

"When you've got equipment and staff, things can really improve. We can go to more schools," said Dr. Jane Grover, director of the center's dental office. "You can see why a school-based center would be integral to letting parents know we're here."

The Smiles on Wheels program, through the **Jackson County Health Department**, is another mobile dental option for schools and community groups in Jackson County.

A team of three dental hygienists — Kim Crabtree, Betsy Southern and Stephanie Moor — travels to schools and also has a stationary clinic at the health department, 1715 Lansing Ave., which is open Thursday and Friday each week.

Since its inception about three years ago, Smiles on Wheels has treated more than 2,500 adults and children, Southern said.

Smiles on Wheels accepts insured, uninsured and Medicaid patients — the only requirement for a full teeth cleaning is that the patient cannot have a regular dentist, Crabtree said.

More than 200 students have attended Smiles on Wheels school clinics since the start of the school year, which is more than in past years, Southern said.

This increase is primarily due to more children coming to each clinic, she added. Smiles on Wheels provides treatment for first-, second-, sixth- and seventh-graders, and will offer to return if not all registered children are seen.

"It's our second or third time there," Southern said. "(Schools) are encouraging it more and kids are losing their insurance. Parents are recognizing the value of our services."

Students without regular dentists are eligible for teeth cleanings and X-rays at the school clinics. All students receive fluoride treatment, and a **Michigan Department of Community Health** grant allows the hygienists to put sealants on teeth if they are developed enough, even if a child has a regular dentist, Crabtree said.

Shana Kuhn, a Smiles on Wheels coordinator, escorts students from classrooms to the mobile dental clinic, contacts parents and keeps track of paperwork. At a clinic in November, Kuhn, using a plastic model of molars, explained the sealant procedure to a group of Brooklyn Elementary School students as they waited.

"It doesn't hurt. It's hard for you guys to get at all the little germs," Kuhn told the students, pointing to the crevices in the model teeth without sealants.

"This sealant makes your teeth nice for a long, long time."

Amy Tumas of Brooklyn brought her 7-year-old daughter, Jensen, to the Brooklyn clinic for sealants, and she said Jensen wasn't nervous about visiting the dentist.

"This is just easier," Tumas said. "As soon as she heard there were no shots, she was fine."

Smiles on Wheels is funded strictly from donations, grants and insurance payments, and Southern and

Crabtree say more funding and time for grant-writing are key to helping the program expand.

Encouraging good oral hygiene and regular dental treatment at a young age aims to reduce disease in adulthood, Grover said.

Common problems seen in children include gingivitis; dental abscesses, which can turn into infections; and decay in baby teeth, which can cause a tooth to split when the permanent tooth grows in, she said.

"We can cut future health-care costs by focusing on the younger population," Grover said.

"It is gratifying that this particular issue is seen as important."

As more schools request mobile dental services, the need for funding and support to meet this demand also is rising.

Hosting a mobile dental clinic is free to schools, and once students are seen the timing and coordination of follow-up care can be improved, Grover said.

But many children, including those who are covered for treatment through Medicaid, still are not getting proper dental care, and these programs seek to close that gap.

"Unfortunately, dental care is not looked at as important as medical care," Green said. "A lot of parents aren't knowledgeable. We can afford everyone the opportunity to have that care on site while they're at school."

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