



Local dentists care for needy kids; More than 100 children at Free Sealant Day

Published: February 11, 2007

CALEB HEERINGA THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

For many low-income parents in Whatcom County, their children's dental health often takes a back seat to things like paying rent and putting food on the table.

But a little preventative dental care can go a long way for those kids, who may otherwise be doomed to a life of expensive dental work, tooth decay and other health problems.

More than 100 children from low-income families attended Saturday's third annual Free Sealant Day at Interfaith Community Health Center to get free or low-cost dental work from local dentists and learn whether they qualify for low-income assistance programs.

The event was organized by the Whatcom Oral Health Coalition, Mt. Baker Dental Hygienists' Society and dozens of local volunteers. Dr. Eric McRory, who runs a dental clinic in Bellingham, said these sorts of programs prevent small dental problems from "snowballing" into worse problems later in life. "Once you get a filling on a tooth, it's only a matter of time until you need a bigger filling or a crown," McRory said. "We're preventing the snowball from heading down the hill in the first place."

When it comes to ensuring the dental health of low-income families, organizers said sealants are second only to fluoridating the drinking water, a proposal Bellingham voters rejected in 2005 due to health concerns. Of the 82 children who were examined at last year's event, dentists diagnosed 143 cavities and 13 kids with rampant decay, meaning they had seven or more cavities.

Nona Groesbeck, president of the hygienists' group, said recent studies have shown ties between poor dental health and an increased chance of heart disease, diabetes and premature birth in teenage mothers. "In the past we used to think of teeth as being separate from the body," Groesbeck said. "But any bacteria that get in your mouth can travel to any other part of your body." The event was also a chance for local dentists to help patients they couldn't normally afford to treat. McRory said he accepted Department of Social and Health Services coupons when he opened his practice 11 years ago, but soon realized that the money from the state didn't even cover the costs of seeing the patient, such as materials and his employees' wages. "If I see a patient with a DSHS coupon, I'm obligating myself to see them all," McRory said.

Silvia Ayala of Bellingham heard about the event through the Opportunity Council and brought her three children: Araceli, 17, Ruben, 14, and Ashley, 7, who pride themselves with brushing often. And, as shown by the smiles on the kids' faces when they came out of their free examinations, they had done their share of brushing and flossing at home.

"No cavities," Ruben Ayala bragged.

Copyright, 2007, The Bellingham Herald, All Rights Reserved.