

Access to affordable, quality dental care still an issue

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I've been a dentist in Whatcom County for more than 20 years. My colleagues and I continue to see children and adults with conditions requiring considerable treatment. Much of this treatment could have been avoided with better prevention and routine maintenance.

This is a critical issue, and one that affects our entire community. Dental problems that go untreated can worsen diabetes, lead to the spreading of infections or heart malfunctions and, in pregnant women, cause low birth weight for their babies.

According to a recent study by the Washington State Hospital Association, unspecified dental disorders is the No. 1 reason why the uninsured go to the ER, often for issues that were worsened by lack of routine care and could have been prevented with regular dental visits.

As doctors of dentistry, we know that oral health care is essential for our complete physical health, and is something everyone needs and deserves. My colleagues and I were greatly disappointed with the failure of the fluoride initiative, as we saw it as a valuable tool in helping prevent dental disease. Since that time, local dentists have been working on ways to assist the increasing number of patients in our community requiring care. While there are myriad reasons beyond the control of dentists for access problems, we're working to fix the problem one patient at a time.

Members of the Mount Baker Dental Society volunteer their professional services in a charitable care program with the Interfaith Community Health Center in Bellingham. Volunteer dentists, hygienists and assistants have been serving low-income adults through the Donated Adult Dental Program (DAD) since April 2007. Last year, the DAD Program provided care to more than 360 patients. Dentists volunteer at the clinic two days a month and dental support staff is provided by both the Interfaith Clinic and by volunteers.

DAD is an excellent example of local resources effectively tackling difficult community health needs. The Interfaith CHC staff identifies the dental care needs of the patients. The Mount Baker Dental Society recruits volunteer dentists, including specialists such as endodontists and oral surgeons, to provide the needed treatment. St. Joseph Hospital and the Washington State Dental Foundation have contributed funding to this collaborative effort to ensure the program runs smoothly and effectively. These are just a few examples of the charitable activities dentists are involved in throughout Whatcom County.

While we celebrate our volunteer activities, we realize that our efforts must also be directed at developing policy solutions that improve dental access for all those in need. The “ Access to Baby and Child Dentistry” (ABCD) project is an example of thoughtful, successful public policy. This nationally acclaimed program has dramatically improved access to oral health care for hundreds of children throughout Washington in both rural and urban areas.

It is successful because of a collaboration of efforts from legislators, the University of Washington’s School of Dentistry, organized dentistry, local health departments and the Medicaid/DSHS program. Special features of this program include emphasis on family education, case management, primary prevention, improved access to dental offices for treatment, dentist provider training and modest improvements in fee reimbursement from the Medicaid program. ABCD saves money for Medicaid while improving dental health, as documented in research by the University of Washington. We’ll keep working to help solve this problem through both individual actions and collaborative efforts.

However, we also urge the Legislature to work with us, as they have in the past, to help craft policy solutions that provide access to affordable dental care, but do not put patients at risk or offer only fragmented care. Washingtonians deserve high quality, affordable oral healthcare, and dentists across the state are committed to help make it happen.

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