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Community clinics help meet children's dental needs

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Red marks color the dental chart, indicating cavities so large the patient needs eight root canals -- and he's only 6 years old.

"It's a very common thing that we see," said Brindha Subramanian, managing dentist at the Children's Dental Center of Sunnyvale.

The confetti-patterned carpet in the center's hallways and stuffed toys perched atop child-size dental chairs contrast sharply with the sobering news that too often such a preventable condition as cavities goes untreated for so long.

Not all the children Subramanian treats need root canals like her 6-year-old patient, but many need fillings and other restorative work to deal with neglected tooth decay.

Access to care is the primary challenge for these children, Subramanian said. About 70 to 80 percent of the patients who come to the center are on government-subsidized insurance plans such as Denti-Cal, the dental plan for Medi-Cal, Healthy Families or Healthy Kids.

Jolene Smith, executive director of FIRST 5 Santa Clara County -- a taxpayer-funded organization devoted to healthy child development in their first five years -- agreed and added that the parents' lack of awareness of how to care for their children's teeth and how important baby teeth are exacerbates the problem.

Many falsely think baby teeth don't matter because they fall out anyway, Subramanian said.

"Baby teeth are very important," she said. They help with chewing, they guide adult teeth as they

come in, ensuring they're aligned properly in the mouth, and in some children, losing baby teeth early can affect their speech.

In the most recent data available from the National Survey of Children's Health, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control in 2007 and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 23.5 percent of California's children had cavities within the past six months of the survey -- three times higher than the percentage of children in California with asthma at the time of the survey. The American Academy of Pediatrics labels asthma as one of the most common chronic childhood diseases, affecting 5 million children.

"Eighty percent of the decay we see is found in 20 percent of the population," said Rhea Haugseth, president of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. And most of those cases are in lower socioeconomic groups. "Those children are most at risk," Haugseth said.

Before the Children's Dental Center opened on June 25, only two Sunnyvale dentists accepted Denti-Cal patients, according to Medi-Cal's website. The center employs two dentists and hopes to add a third.

There are even fewer options for residents in East Palo Alto. Ravenswood Family Dentistry is the only dental clinic in East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park, said Yogita Thakur, dental director at Ravenswood. They accept patients of all ages, but only if they're in programs such as Denti-Cal, Healthy Families and Healthy Kids.



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Ravenswood relies on fundraising and grants from public and private entities to stay afloat. The low reimbursement rates from Denti-Cal aren't enough to sustain their daily operations, Thakur said.

Medi-Cal reimburses the Ravenswood clinic \$125 per visit per patient, Thakur said. But if a child needs a filling (about \$250) or a root canal (about \$100 to \$125), plus sedation (\$200 to \$500), Ravenswood loses money.

Other facilities, such as the Silva Pediatric Medical and Dental Clinic in south Hayward, are a part of larger entities like St. Rose Hospital that help with costs.

A lot of dentists in Alameda County don't accept Denti-Cal or other forms of government-subsidized insurance, said Mary Ann Ramirez, a supervisor at Silva Pediatric Dental Clinic. Ramirez said that they aim to become a dental home, or a place that parents can bring their children to on a regular basis. Once they realize they can keep coming back, "they're great patients," she said.

The Children's Dental Center in Sunnyvale is a public-private partnership. The Health Trust, a nonprofit Silicon Valley organization that promotes healthy living, as well as FIRST 5 Santa Clara County and El Camino Hospital provided the initial startup money for the Sunnyvale clinic.

They contracted the Children's Dental Group of Southern California, a for-profit organization, to staff and run the clinic.

"I like it here," said 10-year-old Fernando Villanueva standing next to Subramanian as they looked at pictures of cavities. His mother, Sunnyvale resident Leticia Sanchez, said she likes bringing her two children to the center because the staff is kind, most of them speak Spanish and she can get appointments quickly.

Services aren't free, but staff members work with the families to figure out how much they must pay depending on which insurance plan they're on.

The large movie screen in the lobby and the bank of televisions angled in kid-friendly positions above the reception desk don't hurt either.

Even the dental chairs are wired for more than drilling. Mayrin Villanueva, Sanchez's 6-year-old

daughter, quietly watches a television mounted on the ceiling while Dr. Rana Rakow fills four of her cavities.

"I just know I had a calling," Subramanian said when asked why she works with children.

The clinic accepts any child who is in pain, she said. "We don't treat insurance," Subramanian said. "We treat the child."

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