

Addressing overwhelming need

Jenn Watt
Editor

Photos show rows of teeth eaten away by decay.

The dentists tell stories of patients with chronic infections and swelling that disrupts their daily lives.

One man pulled eight of his own teeth. The need was greater than most anticipated.

It's been just six months since the Volunteer Dental Outreach clinic opened in Haliburton and in that time, more than \$113,762 in dental work has been completed - double the estimates of the committee that launched the service for low-income adults.

"What we didn't expect was the amount of decay: the degree of need within each patient," founding member and office volunteer Lisa Kerr says.

"My expectation was they'd need a few fillings here or there. They're needing extensive work."

Lisa's husband, Dr. Bill Kerr, is doing much of the work as a volunteer dentist at the clinic.

He has been involved in many volunteer dentistry pursuits, but even he was stunned by the depth of need in Haliburton County.

"There are things that I see in this clinic that I've never seen in 24 years of practice and I've gone to Honduras and done dentistry and I've done free clinics in Scarborough and I just am blown away," he says.

"You're seeing people who haven't seen a dentist in 25 years."

While there are government dental health programs for children from low-income households, there is nothing for adults.

Living in one of the poorest counties in Ontario, it is predictable that many won't regularly visit the dentist for lack of finances.

What the staff at the clinic have seen is the result of that involuntary neglect.

"I saw a 74-year-old man who's seen a dentist three times in his life and the majority of his own teeth are missing. He's pulled them himself," hygienist Lisa Stoughton says.

So far, Volunteer Dental Outreach has seen 111 patients and there are about 28 on the waiting list.

While the community has rallied around the clinic through strong fundraising efforts, to meet the need the committee is looking



Jenn Watt Echo staff

Volunteer Dental Outreach Clinic workers, left, Kathy and John Purc and Skye Smith show off the dentures Smith was working on Nov. 9. John Purc, a local dentist, volunteers two days a month with his wife Kathy, who does office administration. Smith, a dental assistant, is the clinic's sole employee.

for another two or three dentists to volunteer their time.

SIRCH Community Services has provided the institutional support to the clinic, allowing donations to flow through their organization, rather than requiring the clinic to establish a separate charity.

SIRCH also screens potential patients to determine financial need.

From what they've garnered, Gena Robertson isn't surprised many are choosing food and shelter over a trip to the dentist.

"51 per cent of the average person's income they're paying shelter cost. 14 per cent on food. They don't have any money left over. Certainly not for dental," says Robertson, who is executive director of SIRCH and also sits on the committee for the clinic.

According to SIRCH's screening statistics, the average monthly income of clinic users is \$1,492. The average amount spent on food a month is \$210. Average shelter

cost: \$758.

"A lot of people don't go to the dentist because they don't have the finances. They let their mouths go because they can't afford it," Dr. John Purc says.

Purc, along with his wife Kathy, volunteers twice a month at the clinic. He also works as a dentist part-time in Bracebridge and formerly had his own practice in Minden.

Skipping the dentist for lack of money can have a snowball effect - not only do small problems become worse, but fear of the unknown grows.

"[One patient] had to get all of his teeth out. The reason he never did was he was so petrified," Purc recalls.

Judy M. felt the same way. "I had problems with dentists in the past," said Judy, who did not wish to have her full name published.

Bill helped her get over her fear without sedation, which she used to require to get

through appointments.

"It was really, really good to go there. It felt really comfortable. It's a wonderful atmosphere."

Because Judy's income is low, she qualifies for government assistance with prescription drugs, but has no dental coverage.

When she arrived at the clinic she needed multiple fillings and a root canal.

She's had a few appointments and has one or two more to go, but she's not concerned about it.

"The next time I came back I had a big smile on my face. It's been the happiest time I've ever gone to a dentist in my life," she said.

Judy's friend, Patricia A., had an equally comforting experience.

Living on an old age pension, the Haliburton resident needed fillings, some work