

Paving the Way to Healthy Smiles

Mobile dental unit benefits children across Oklahoma

By Annie Whitfield

For thousands of children living in Oklahoma, dental health is often an overlooked health-care need; it may not be easily accessible or easily affordable. The Oklahoma Mobile Dental Care Program, an outreach service of the Oklahoma Dental Foundation, is working hard to change that situation for kids across the state.

It's probably difficult to believe, but dental caries, or dental decay, is the most common, chronic disease among children. According to research provided by the University of Oklahoma's College of Dentistry, 51 million school hours are missed each year because of toothaches and dental related problems.

"It's really sad," Heath Whitfield, student at the College of Dentistry, said. "Kids learn to adapt and deal with the pain, because they have no other option. They miss out on activities because they are hurting."

Many dentists are opening their practices in the Tulsa and Oklahoma City Metro areas, leaving rural areas lacking. In fact, 115,306 Oklahoma children and counting, have little or no access to dental services. Needless to say, the Mobile Dental Unit is critical for underserved children in Oklahoma.

"It's very important," Cari Ogden, program director at the Oklahoma Dental Foundation explained. "For one thing, there are a number of counties in the state that have no dentist at all or do not have enough dentists to cover the population, particularly children."

After much planning, The Oklahoma Mobile Dental Care Program took off in May and started serving children in the Oklahoma City area. Community partners, such as Head Start, often help promote the program.



A mother looks in her daughter's mouth while they wait to see the dentist.



A volunteer enters the Mobile Dental Unit, which is a converted Winnebago outfitted with state-of-the-art dental equipment so that it can serve as an office on wheels.

Volunteering dentists and, at times, dental students, screen the children to assess their treatment needs. Once a child is screened, they wait to see the dentist, and are often treated the same day.

"Sometimes it gets hectic trying to get doctor appointments, or sometimes just finding the right dentist, and this was just an easy thing," explained Christina Mapp, mother of Destany, a patient participating in the mobile dental program.

According to Dr. Susan Whitneck, a volunteer dentist for the program, every one of the dentists and assistants that work in the unit volunteer their time.

"It's just so important to give back," Whitneck said. "I used to help with my church; I've been to Honduras and Bolivia. That's a much longer trip, and I'm away from my family. This is easier and just as rewarding."

So how are dentists able to work out on the road? In style! The mobile dental unit is a Winnebago that has been converted into a state-of-the-art, technologically advanced, dental office on wheels.

The unit has two dental chairs and is equipped with digital x-rays, curing lights and all the equipment dentists and assistants need to do their job, although they may stumble around at first trying to find the right instruments.

"They're used to their dental practice," Guillermo Gallegos, executive director of the Oklahoma Dental Foundation explained. "But when they come to the mobile dental unit, it's almost like being in a foreign country. They don't exactly know where everything

is, so we try to make it as pleasant as possible for them and put smiles on the faces of children they see. It makes it worth their time. They come out with a smile as well."

Kids who go too long without dental care often suffer pain, poor nutrition, dysfunction and even distress about their appearance that can, to a great extent, reduce a child's ability to succeed in life. But with the mobile dental unit sweeping the state these problems are sure to ease.

The mobile dental unit sees kids of all ages. The Oklahoma Dental foundation, along with the dentists and assistants who volunteer for the mobile dental unit, preach prevention so that kids can save their teeth and maintain healthy smiles. The goal is to teach them good oral hygiene and council them on nutrition so that they won't have to miss out on activities because of pain.

"It's just a great feeling to get kids more involved, to get them caring about their teeth and hopefully in the future they can save their smile," Whitfield said.

The mobile dental clinic volunteers will soon be helping kids in rural Oklahoma. Folks in the Panhandle, Adair, Muskogee and Southeast Oklahoma will see this extraordinary vehicle heading their way sometime this fall.

The program is staffed by volunteers and funded by donations. If you are interested in helping, you can contact the Oklahoma Dental Foundation at 405-848-8873 or visit their website www.okdf.org.