Dientes clinic sends dentists to low-income Santa Cruz County schools

By Kara Guzman Santa Cruz Sentinel Santa Cruz Sentinel

SANTA CRUZ -- With Dientes community dental, low-income students in Santa Cruz, Pajaro Valley and Live Oak school districts have a better chance at healthy teeth.

Every six months, the Santa Cruz clinic brings dental chairs to gymnasiums and classrooms in 10 low-income schools, giving free screenings to children who otherwise would not have access. The clinic is one of three in the county that accept Medi-Cal and serve children.

Tana Stragalinos, Dientes outreach manager, said when she started visiting schools two years ago, she saw children with mouths full of stainless steel crowns.

"You see a child smile at you and all their teeth are silver," said Stragalinos. "Basically our goal was to reach these children before they got to a point where they were in a serious dental emergency."

The school outreach program starts with registered dental assistants giving classrooms a 10-minute brush and flossing workshop. Applications are sent home and students without a regular dentist, or who are already Dientes patients, are invited to return for a free screening at the school, Stragalinos said.

David Wistrom, associate dental director, said the two-chair makeshift school clinics are equipped to do anything from tooth extractions to root canals.

"Just because we cater to patients who don't have access to dental care doesn't mean we skimp," Wistrom said.

In the Dientes van, Wistrom brings carts filled with tools, an X-ray unit, laptops and anesthesia.

The van stops not only at schools, but also nursing homes, juvenile hall and centers for migrant farm workers and the homeless, he said.

"The outreach work is some of the most fun I've had in my career," said Wistrom, who left a private practice outside Sacramento in March.

Santa Cruz resident Chloe Meera said she signed up her son, Gault Elementary first grader Hunter Shores, for a screening at the school for the convenience.

Meera said she hasn't been to the dentist since Medi-Cal stopped funding adult visits in 2009, but she brings Hunter to the Dientes clinic each year, in addition to the school visits, to make sure his teeth are healthy.

Hunter, who received an exam from Wistrom in the Gault gymnasium Dec. 16, said he's happy he didn't have any cavities. He pointed to a gap between his teeth and said the tooth fairy brought him quarters and pennies last month.
"I have a big boy tooth coming," Hunter said. "It was my first one. It kind of feels bare without my tooth."

Erika Pacheco, Gault kindergartener, sat in the next exam chair, waiting for her turn with the X-ray. She said she was excited about her first trip to the dentist.

"My favorite part is getting a toy at the end," she whispered. "You know who told me? My mommy."

Follow Sentinel reporter Kara Guzman at Twitter.com/Karambutan

DIENTES COMMUNITY DENTAL

WHAT: Low-cost dental services, an outreach program in schools, nursing homes and service centers
WHERE: Clinic located at 1830 Commercial Way, Santa Cruz
INFORMATION: Call 831-464-5409 or visit www.dientes.org