

NEWS > HEALTH

# Oral health professionals increase services, safety protocols as pandemic continues

Dental experts plead with residents to keep caring for their teeth



Safety of patients and staff is at the forefront of continuing to provide essential services at local dental offices. (Shmuel Thaler – Santa Cruz Sentinel file)

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SANTA CRUZ – Across the county, community organizations that offer dental health care have learned that success in a pandemic means changing the way they operate.

Dientes Community Dental and Salud Para La Gente have faced constraints in providing care to those who need it in the last year due to restrictions around the coronavirus.

At Dientes Community Dental, capacity in clinics has been reduced by approximately 15%. At Salud Para La Gente, young patients who normally go to school-based clinics have been contacted to try to bring them to larger clinics.

It is unknown how many children have missed appointments due to the closure of school-based clinics in the last year, said Carina Chavez Salud Para La Gente associate director of Communications & Public Affairs in an email.

“Salud used its tracking and recall systems to schedule our younger patients ...” Chavez said. “We extended our hours to 7:30 p.m. to increase access for our patients.”

With both establishments, outreach has been limited. Chief Dental Officer at Dientes, Dr. Sepi Taghvai, said in recent days that the program that typically serves people that can't come to a clinic has been affected dramatically.

“For example, we provide dental services in schools and nursing homes,” Taghvai said. “We have stopped all of our outreach programs except Housing Matters. That means a loss of approximately 2,000 visits that are not being provided to children in schools and seniors in nursing homes.”

Going to the dentist, even during a health crisis, is possible with these measures in order to focus on prevention and early intervention.

“Not receiving proper care can lead to many complications with dental and overall health,” the chief dental officer said. “Furthermore, a study that was published recently found that patients with gum disease have more severe COVID complications.”



Taghvaei was referring to a study published in the Journal of Clinical Periodontology in early February that showed those with COVID-19 and gum disease were 3.5 times more likely to be admitted to the ICU and 4.5 times more likely to need a ventilator. They were nearly nine times more likely to die compared to those without gum disease, professionals found.

The bottom line is that it is safe and necessary to visit the dentist, Taghvaei said.

“Dental offices have implemented many practices to keep our patients and staff safe including COVID screenings for patients and staff prior to entering the clinic, extra protective equipment and gear, outside waiting rooms (and more),” she said. “There has not been a single case of transmission of COVID from dentist or staff to a patient nationwide.”

Despite the fallout of 2020 and all the events that came along with it, Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County recently released an encouraging 2021 report card that summarizes the progress from work done by partners such as Dientes and Salud Para La Gente. The report card showed that from its strategic plan 2017-20, 64% of children are going to the dentist versus 36% of children in 2014.

“There is more work to be done for patients of all ages,” Taghvaei said in the introduction co-written with Supervisor Zach Friend. “Currently only 22% of low-income adults and seniors on Medi-Cal are able to go to the dentist.”

To encourage more access to care, Salud has been hiring more mid-level providers to grow appointments since 2018 and Dientes continues to add to its services through a new clinic to open in Live Oak in 2022.

“COVID has affected all of our lives in many ways, but oral health has been affected too,” Taghvaei said during the Oral Health Summit one month ago. “We’re not seeing as many patients as we used to see ... we’ve made a lot of progress but with COVID we took a little bit of a hit with improving access to care. I’m hoping with 2021 and vaccinations happening throughout our county we can get back on track.”

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## Melissa Hartman

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