

Agency aims to boost dental care for kids

120,000 SANTA CLARA COUNTY YOUTH NEED HELP, STUDY SAYS

By Ben Winograd
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One-third of Santa Clara County children younger than 9 suffer from untreated tooth decay, and minority and poor children suffer the most, according to a study released today that focuses on the lack of access to care.

The study "for the first time quantifies the need out there and puts a face on the extent of the problem" at the county level, said Dr. David Lees, who directed the research, sponsored by the non-profit Health Trust, an agency aimed at improving access to health services to the under-served in Silicon Valley.

More than a matter of simple hygiene, the study suggests, dental problems can affect students' performance at school.

"Distracted behavior. . . a loss of self-esteem -- there are all kinds of byproducts from pain in your mouth," said Lees, who is director of the Health Trust's children's dental initiative.

The study -- which surveyed children in kindergarten and third grade, as well as children in Head Start, a preschool program for low-income children -- suggests economic disparities exist in kids needing "urgent" dental care and the ability of parents to provide that care. Broken down ethnically, 30 percent of Latino parents said they didn't find dental care for their children during the past two years, compared with 13 percent of Asian parents and 7 percent of white parents. In many cases, cost was a factor, the study says.

The study also suggests that families for which English was not the primary language are less likely to visit dentists.

"We need to reach out -- in their language -- to identify barriers they perceive as inhibitive," Lees said, such as the belief that children must be a certain age to receive dental care.

"Given the economics of the valley, those people have a hard time making ends meet, and dentistry is a discretionary service," Lees said.

The study estimated that 140,000 children live in Santa Clara County families for whom dental care is not an economic priority. But, according to the study, dentists in the county can accommodate only about 20,000 of those cases through various social programs. Dentistry centers that cater to low-income children are quickly overwhelmed by extreme cases that require a great amount of work, Lees said.

"There's a small but significant number of kids whose needs are off the charts -- every other tooth is decayed," Lees said.

The result, he said, is a never-ending cycle in which the centers end up treating children with rampant decay and neglecting those with moderate decay. Eventually, the neglected children suffer rampant decay.

Mobile dental service

Some efforts exist to bring dental services directly to children. Since 1999, the Tooth Mobile

has visited more than 4,000 students from Gilroy to South Lake Tahoe -- including 21 Santa Clara County elementary and middle schools. The mobile service offers free cleanings, said Mike Reza, who runs the operation.

Reza said he and his brother, dentist Al Parhizkari, have made only a dent in the problem.

Will Avila of San Jose said he and his wife find it hard to take advantage of the dental insurance their employers provide.

They do their best to take their children, Brandon, a fifth-grader with three cavities, and Josh, a first-grader with two, to the dentist every six months. But it isn't easy.

Between driving to the office, waiting in line, and routine checkups turning into lengthy procedures, Avila has to weigh the trade-offs.

A 45-minute cleaning can turn into "2 1/2 hours of lost education," he said. "If we found something closer, with better hours, it would be more convenient."

Compared with statewide figures, Santa Clara County children maintained better overall dental health. The state's last comprehensive study, completed in 1994, found untreated tooth decay in 55 percent of California pupils in kindergarten through third grade.

The Health Trust's survey being released today found untreated tooth decay in 31 percent of children screened.

Good eating habits, brushing, flossing and making regular visits to a dentist promote healthy teeth. Other factors -- cutting across racial and socioeconomic lines -- fall beyond a parent's control.

"If you have higher bacteria in your saliva, you have a high percentage of coming down with cavities," said Reza, of the Tooth Mobile. "Some of it is genetics. Some of it you can get from the environment you're in."

Saliva testing urged

Both Reza and the study advocate testing the saliva of parents and young children to identify poor dental genetics before tooth decay sets in.

Making saliva testing standard is important, he said, because dental disease is almost "100 percent preventable." That gives him hope for eliminating children's dental problems in the future.

"Fifty years from now we might have a situation where nobody has cavities," Reza said. ``Twenty years ago, if I told you nobody smokes in public in California, you would have laughed at me."

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