

North Country HealthCare Working to Prevent Dental ER Visits

By Dr. Kimberley Williams- Barnes

Each year, many individuals visit the emergency room for dental related issues. It was recently reported that for many Americans this is the first line of treatment for dental care. Severe oral disease including abscesses, neck or facial swelling and infection are just a few of the things that are putting stresses on additional emergency room resources. Emergency rooms generally aren't staffed with dentists and can only provide a prescription for pain and infection. Oral disease is contributing to high healthcare costs and stands out as a compelling argument for supporting healthcare reform.

Over one hundred million Americans lack dental insurance; this is nearly twice the number that lack medical insurance. Employer-sponsored dental benefits are currently the largest source of insurance for dental services, yet rising unemployment, sky rocketing insurance premiums and employers opting to drop these benefits have resulted in reductions in dental coverage. Children from families without dental insurance are three times more likely to have dental needs than children with either public or private insurance and they are more than twice as less likely than insured children to receive dental care. Medicaid is also an important payer of dental care but many states, like Arizona, do not cover routine visits and only offer adult emergency dental coverage. Medicare does not offer oral health coverage for the elderly.

The Community Health Center network is a significant provider of oral healthcare for the nation's uninsured. In 2002 the Bush Administration, as part of the initiative to expand health centers, required that all new health centers must assure access to oral healthcare services regardless of a person's ability to pay.

Last year North Country HealthCare, your local community health center, encountered nearly 2,500 emergency related dental visits and assisted in over 100 referrals to local dentists outside their dental service area. Many of these types of visits could have been prevented had the patient maintained their oral health. Aside from the pain and infection associated with poor oral hygiene other risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease can be made worse due to an unhealthy mouth. Because of the rise in oral disease facing our communities, last year North Country initiated an in-school oral health promotion program. The goal of this program is to provide children with the necessary education to encourage positive lifelong dental habits and overcome the common fears associated with seeing a dentist. In the inaugural year of the program over 700 elementary students within North Country's network received free oral health education, a dental screening with a fluoride treatment and a free gift bag that included a toothbrush, a fun flosser and toothpaste. This year the program is making great strides and has been requested to serve more schools and include junior and high school grade levels.

North Country has a first-rate dental program and offers dental services in three of its 15 locations: Flagstaff, Winslow and Ash Fork. Most insurances are accepted. For the uninsured, a dental sliding fee scale is available which means fees for service are based on your income and family size. A typical preventative dental visit at North Country could cost \$50-\$100 vs. \$1,000 ER visit and allows for affordable payment options. Let North Country HealthCare be "your dental care provider of choice!"

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