

DENTAL NEWS

Charlotte County Health Department opening dental clinic

By LILIANE PARBOT-JOHNSON - FEELING FIT CORRESPONDENT

In Charlotte County, there are 10,000 children who are on Medicaid. These are the patients who will first be treated at the new Health Department Dental Clinic when it opens shortly after the first of the year.

"For our scope of services, we will start with children on Medicaid," said Marne Cothran, spokesperson for the Charlotte County Health Department.

The clinic is located in the new building housing other services at 1100 Loveland Blvd. in Port Charlotte. There, Executive Dental Director Richard Birnbaum, D.M.D., had his first day on the job, Oct. 18, and the next day he offered the Sun's Feeling Fit a tour of the clinic.

"Starting out, we'll probably try for 50 appointments a week," he said.

Birnbaum, who is a pediatric dentist, will have a dental assistant and a hygienist who will identify the needs and perform the cleanings. The county's needs far exceed the clinic's capability, but hopefully resources will be increased to expand the number of patients being treated and will include adults in the future.

Funding comes from the state and the county, and grants have already been received for supplies. In addition to government grants, donations from private foundations are also being sought.

"Hopefully, our schedule will bring on a second dentist and additional staff to take care of the children," Birnbaum said.

The examination rooms are with chairs of different colors; there are blue, green and purple rooms. The rooms have yet to be decorated, and the theme will be child friendly. The clinic also has six different laboratories.

Project Manager Lauren Schmidt said, "Early childhood tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in Florida. It is the number two reason, in general, that people visit the emergency room in Charlotte County."

The health department focuses on "prevention," according to Cochran, and the preventive care received at the clinic will eliminate the need for many of those ER visits.

"We try to educate the public," Cochran added.

One such prevention measure is the "Give Kids A Smile" program. The fourth annual event will take place early next year. The program provides free x-rays, cleaning and dental treatments to Charlotte County children in kindergarten through 12th grade. It is based on need. The forms to fill out are available from the school's nurse.

A parent or guardian must accompany the child for a screening day in January, and there will be a treatment day in February. Area dentists, dental assistants and hygienists volunteer for the program.

"It is for children who have no insurance and no Medicaid," said Volunteer Coordinator Janet Martire. "It is done at the Charlotte Technical Center, and the dental students, there, will be working with the doctors."

The deadline to submit an application is Nov. 17. The screenings will be done on four Friday's in January and the treatments on two Friday's in February, according to Martire.

"Prevention" is also what the Dental Clinic will offer. Early treatment will eliminate the need for parents to rush their children to the emergency room, and eliminate much suffering for the children.

Before coming to Florida, Birnbaum was a pediatric dentist in suburban Philadelphia, Penn., where he had his private practice for 30 years.

"I retired in Florida and went back to work for the state in July of last year," he said. "I was with the Marion County Health Department in Ocala, and this position opened up; I came down here and started yesterday."

Working for the State of Florida, after so many years in private practice, opened up a new world for the dentist.

"It was a whole new viewpoint, a whole different outlook of how dentistry is needed by the public. I'll give you an example. On my first week in Ocala, we had a 15-year-old child who needed dentures. The caries were so bad the only treatment options were extraction and dentures."

According to Birnbaum, a child as young as 1 year old should have a dental examination.

At first, Birnbaum had not planned to specialize in pediatric dentistry. After finishing dental school, he got a residency with a facility specializing in "maxillofacial prosthetics," which are for cancer patients.

"Actually, it was very depressing," he said. "At the time, the five-year survival rate was very low for world cancer. We became too emotionally involved with the patients."

Then, he had the opportunity to work on children having cleft palates.

"So I went to the pediatric side," he said.

Birnbaum recommends brushing teeth twice a day for two minutes each time with fluoridated tooth paste. If the water supply does not contain fluoride, as is the case in Charlotte County, a prescription for fluoride supplements should be requested from the physician.

“This would reduce decay problems by 40 to 50 percent,” Birnbaum said, “and watch for sugar intake. Avoid the sticky, sugary food and read the labels. Drink water, not soda. Flossing should start early. Make it a habit; young children need help, obviously. If it starts early, it becomes a habit. We hope to start, soon, an educational program for the public for prevention.”

To learn more about services offered at the Charlotte County Health Department, visit online at www.charlottechd.com



Photo by Liliane Parbot-Johnson

Executive Dental Director Richard Birnbaum, D.M.D., shows Marne Cothran, spokesperson for the Charlotte County Health Department, some of the equipment just received for the new dental clinic. “Opening is targeted for after the beginning of the year,” he said. The clinic is located on the ground floor of the new Health Department building at 1100 Loveland Blvd. in Port Charlotte.