

SLT dentist creates program for kids in need

By Kathryn Reed

Dental care can be a luxury. Often it's not covered on health plans or it's cost prohibitive to add it. And most doctors don't accept Affordable Care Act or Medi-Cal patients.

One South Lake Tahoe dentist is bucking the trend. Mireya Ortega through her Young Tahoe Smiles program is providing extremely low cost care for ages 0-16. Until this year the youngest children she saw were 5 year olds.

She started the program in 2010; and it has grown each year. Partly this has to do with the First 5 dental van no longer making visits here, part has to do with the casinos not offering dental care to most employees and part of it has to do with the economy not turning around for everyone in the area.



Mireya Ortega through Tahoe Young Smiles ensures youth have quality dental care. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Through 2014 she saw 196 patients. This equated to more than 600 visits and more than 2,100 procedures. The care is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

It's not just a cleaning. Ortega takes X-rays, provides fluoride, sealants, basic fillings, baby teeth root canals and extractions.

Having the young patients come back at six-month intervals has made a dramatic difference in reducing the care they need and getting them to do the basics. Hygiene has improved, and she can provide preventative care and less restorative care.

Ortega does all of this because she knows that catching dental issues early can lead to better overall health. Plus, getting kids to understand the importance of oral hygiene is easier than teaching adults.

According to the American Dental Association, the first dental visit should be by age 1 or as soon as the first tooth appears. By kindergarten more than 40 percent of kids in the U.S. have tooth decay, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Ortega's literature about the program says, "Young Tahoe Smiles is a dental program whose mission is to provide basic dental care to children in the age group of 0 to 16 years, who are dentally ill, financially challenged, underserved, and without dental insurance or any other assistance program to help them. The goal is to restore children's oral health to a stable, infection free, pain free and functional state."

Also new this year, Ortega changed the income requirements to allow more patients. She verifies financial eligibility and sets fees accordingly. The minimum charge is \$5.

For Ortega, Young Tahoe Smiles is a better way to care for kids than Medi-Cal. (No dentists in South Lake Tahoe accept Medi-Cal.)

“(Medi-Cal) is a time consuming process. It’s not worth it,” Ortega told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It’s assembly line dentistry. It’s not the type of care I like to provide.”

It’s not just kids she addresses. Educating the parents about dental care is part of the deal, too.

She also has dental plans for adults who don’t have medical insurance.

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Notes:

- High Sierra Dental Care is at 1060 Ski Run Blvd., South Lake Tahoe.
- For more info, call 530.541.7040.