



October 11, 2015

Free dental clinic provides care to many who've gone without

By Judy Benson



Dr. Brendan Dolan, DMD and Jessica Johnson, CDA, perform oral surgery on Nilesh Patel, as the Mission of Mercy Dental Clinic treats hundreds of patients, at no charge, at the East Lyme High School, Saturday, October 10, 2015. (Steven Frischling/Special to The Day)

East Lyme — Despite some lingering numbness and a mouthful of gauze, Michael Burns spoke enthusiastically about how he'd spent his morning Saturday.

“I just got about \$1,000 worth of dental work,” he said, just before checking out of the Mission of Mercy free dental clinic at East Lyme High School that had been open since 6 a.m. and will continue Sunday. “I had a cleaning and a tooth extraction and an infection taken care of.”

Burns, a town resident and self-employed home improvement contractor, said the free clinic was the first time he'd had dental care in about two years.

“I can't afford my regular dentist right now,” he said, holding an ice pack and prescription medications he was given to alleviate pain once the Novocaine wore off. “The people here were fantastic. They really care about people.”

Burns was one of about 250 people who came to the two-day clinic, staffed by about 575 volunteer dentists, hygienists, nurses and others and sponsored by the [Connecticut Foundation for Dental Outreach](#), a Southington-based nonprofit group.

Dr. Robert Schreiber, a retired pediatric dentist from Glastonbury, said he started the group nine years ago to provide dental care to people “slipping between the cracks” because of a variety of reasons.

Many people who come to the clinic, he said, have medical insurance but not dental coverage, or have high-deductible plans they can’t afford.

“A lot of the target population is the working poor,” he said. “They have jobs, but can’t afford the co-pays, and they’re getting higher and higher.”

About 97 percent of the patients, he said, are adults. Children have more access to low or no-cost dental care through the state’s HUSKY insurance, school-based health clinics and other programs, he said.

Since the group started, he said, they have provided about \$10 million worth of free care to about 15,000 patients around the state.

Until this year, the group ran one clinic per year, but this year expanded to offer two clinics — one in Danbury in March and this one in East Lyme, the first time Mission of Mercy has operated in southeastern Connecticut.

Dr. Gregory Toback, a New London periodontist, organized local dentists to bring the clinic to New London County.

“There was a lot of enthusiasm by the local dental community to host this event,” he said.

Among patients he had treated thus far that day was a young man from New London with a painful infected tooth that Toback extracted.

Another patient had a decayed and unsightly front tooth that also needed to be removed.

Several dentists have offered to provide replacement teeth after extractions at the clinic in follow-up appointments at their offices.

Schreiber said that for some patients, getting longstanding dental care needs taken care of can be “life changing.”

“Some of them can get jobs after this, because before they were afraid to smile,” he said.

Schreiber said the biggest need among patients who came to the clinic was for cleanings and to have cavities removed and filled. In addition, Toback said, many also need old fillings or other previously done dental work replaced.

“There are a lot of patients with aging dentistry,” he said.

One of them was Marion Davis of Bristol, whose son brought her to the clinic for her first cleaning in about four years and replacement of an old filling.

“I can’t afford the dentist,” she said, as she waited her turn in one of the 10 chairs set up for those who need replacement fillings. “They’re charging too much.”

The clinic was set up in space provided for free in the high school’s commons area that normally serves as the cafeteria.

Upon entering, patients were channeled through an orderly setup of screenings, triage, waiting and treatment areas, equipped with a wide variety of mobile dental equipment including exam chairs and lights, pharmacy station, electric suction devices and digital X-ray machines.

The equipment was purchased with grants and donations, Schreiber said.

The clinic opened at 6 a.m. that morning and would remain open until the last patient was care for, he said, then reopen at 6 a.m. on Sunday.

No appointment is needed.



East Lyme High School is transformed into a free Dental Clinic, handling everything from basic dental hygiene to oral surgery, as the Mission of Mercy Dental Clinic treats hundreds of patients, at no charge, Saturday, October 10, 2015. (Steven Frischling/Special to The Day)

“People can just show up,” he said. “We hope to see even more patients.”

That’s exactly what Jason Bailey did Saturday morning.

The 30-year-old West Hartford resident, who emigrated from Jamaica two years ago, said he came at the urging of his wife, who was also receiving care at the clinic.

It was the first time he'd ever been to the dentist.

"It's a good environment," he said, reclining in an exam chair as Dr. David Goldschneider of East Lyme prepared to remove a cavity. "Everybody's nice."

New London residents Chris and Clara Pezzello had their first cleaning in about three years at the clinic.

"The last time we had cleanings was when we had dental insurance," Chris Pezzello said.

Both work part-time jobs and have medical insurance that doesn't include dental coverage. They had arrived at about 8:30 that morning, and by noon were waiting their turn for fillings.

"It's very efficient, and everyone's very friendly," he said.

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If you go:

What: Mission of Mercy free dental clinic

When: starting at 6 a.m. Oct. 11

Where: East Lyme High School, 30 Chesterfield Road

Services: People in need of dental care can receive free cleanings, extractions, fillings, fluoride treatments, X-rays and other services provided by volunteer dentists and hygienists. No appointment needed. Patients will be seen on a first-come, first-served basis.

Sponsor: The Connecticut Foundation for Dental Outreach, in collaboration with the Connecticut State Dental Association.