

Dr. Sepi Walthard and Zach Friend: Community leaders aim to improve dental-care access

By Dr. Sepi Walthard and Zach Friend, Special to the Sentinel

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A child has difficulty paying attention in class, avoids raising her hand to share and is absent from school often. A veteran is unable to eat or sleep and has missed a job interview. A senior citizen is losing weight because she cannot maintain proper nutrition. What do these seemingly different people have in common?

They suffer from untreated dental disease.

Dental care access might not sound like a major crisis, but the poor oral health within our community can have serious consequences. Dental disease can impact a person's ability to speak, chew or socialize. The resulting pain and complications can affect whether someone is able to hold a job or attend school.

In a study where welfare recipients with severe dental problems received oral healthcare, those who completed their dental treatment were twice as likely to get jobs or move off of welfare as those who didn't finish treatment.

In addition, evidence has shown a link between oral disease and diabetes, adverse birth outcomes, cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's, stroke and more. Because many diseases can be caught early by looking at oral health conditions, dental care is crucial to the health of our residents.

Dientes Community Dental Care commissioned an oral health needs assessment to get a picture of oral health in Santa Cruz County that offered some pretty alarming results. Of the approximately 80,000 Santa Cruz County residents expected to be enrolled in Medi-Cal this year, only 25,000 were able to visit a dentist in 2014. About 30 percent of children in Santa Cruz under the age of 11 have never visited a dentist and nearly one-quarter of all pre-K children in Santa Cruz County have untreated dental decay.

In reality, we have a problem that is even larger than those numbers show. People without any insurance, which includes working families who are undocumented or don't qualify for subsidized programs have not been accounted for. Furthermore, Medicare does not meet seniors' dental needs, and seniors make up the fastest growing demographic in our community. Additionally, there are likely tens of thousands more community members who are not receiving the dental care they need.

The tremendous lack of dental care access and education in the underserved populations of Santa Cruz must be addressed. We are enthusiastic about chairing the Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County steering committee to take action on the status of Santa Cruz County's oral health. Through collaboration and education, this committee has the ability to create real change.

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The 17-member steering committee joins together local health care industry experts, community leaders and

education advocates. The committee is working together to develop recommendations that will improve our community's oral health through dynamic community involvement.

For more information and to follow the actions of the Oral Health Access committee please visit oralhealthsc.org. Comments and ideas from the public are welcome and can be submitted via the website by clicking on the contact tab. Even if you are not a dentist, you can help solve the dental care and oral health challenges of Santa Cruz County.

Dr. Sepi Walthard is dental director at Dientes Community Dental Care, while Zach Friend is a member of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.