

Dental care: 57.7% in Palm Springs area without coverage

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Maria Cruz, of Indio, has her teeth cleaned by registered dental hygienist Joan Abittan during The Flying Doctors Clinic in Thermal on Saturday, September 28, 2013.

Care for the tiniest of mouths

Parents are able to purchase dental coverage for their children through stand-alone plans. Pediatric dental care is considered an essential health benefit in the Affordable Care Act and state-run exchanges are able to offer medical insurance without pediatric dental care as long as they also sell stand-alone plans. A benefit to stand-alone dental coverage is that it allows many people to retain their dentist after the federal reform takes effect. "We estimate that there will be about one million more children who will have dental

benefits and dental coverage," said Dr. Lindsey Robinson. Including pediatric dental care within health plans was a debated topic, and the plans will be embedded in 2015.

A void in dental care

- In 2008, California had about 14 percent of the nation's total number of dentists — the largest percentage of any state
- In Riverside County there were 898 practicing dentists, and with a population of just over 2 million, there were 2.2 dentists for every 5,000 residents. This is below the state average of 3.5 dentists per 5,000.
- Nearly 58 percent of Coachella Valley residents did not have access to health insurance that pays for all or some of dental care in 2010, according to statistics released by the Health Assessment Resource Center's Community Health Monitor Survey.

Marc Robinson has been uninsured for five years. Even as the economy crumbled in 2008, he didn't realize his job was in jeopardy. He's been looking for work, but can't afford private health insurance in the meantime. So, when a filling fell out, he waited.

"Humans can adjust to a lot of things," he said about dealing with the pain.

Recently, a free clinic offering services like acupuncture, mammograms, eye exams and dental care opened up for one day only in Thermal, and Robinson, 55, attended, hoping to see a dentist about his missing filling.

"I just don't want to lose that tooth," he said.

Marc Robinson, who has been living at the Coachella Valley Rescue Mission, was just one of scores of people who waited for free dental care at the Flying Doctors clinic hosted at Desert Mirage High School on Sept. 28. His story was similar to many others who were uninsured and desperate to see a dentist.

When the benefits of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act start in January, many Americans will be able to gain health insurance through expanded MediCal, California's Medicaid program, or from one of the options available through Covered California. Despite the access to physicians, mental health

professionals and other provisions, oral care for adults is not covered, leaving few options.

“Oral health is a part of overall health,” said Dr. Lindsey Robinson, president of the California Dental Association. “The mouth is the gateway to the body.”

Nearly 58 percent of Coachella Valley residents did not have access to health insurance that pays for all or some of dental care in 2010, according to statistics released by the Health Assessment Resource Center’s Community Health Monitor Survey. The systematic survey examined households in eastern Riverside County and polled 3,324 people.

The survey is conducted every three years and the results from 2013 will be released at the beginning of 2014.

Access to affordable dental care has been an obstacle for many uninsured, but what can be equally challenging is finding a local doctor.

“The issue of supply of dentists obviously matters in terms of ‘are people able to get care, and are there enough personnel to provide the care?’ ” said Nadereh Pourat, Ph.D.

In 2008, California had about 14 percent of the nation’s total number of dentists — the largest percentage of any state — according to a health policy fact sheet authored by Pourat at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. Despite the state’s large population (more than 38 million), the data suggests a serious shortage in many counties.

In Riverside County there were 898 practicing dentists, and with a population of just over 2 million, there were 2.2 dentists for every 5,000 residents — below the state average of 3.5 dentists per 5,000. Nationally, it’s estimated there is one dentist for every 1,660 persons.

The study brought attention to a problem of “uneven distribution,” how dentists set up practices in areas with denser populations. But some California residents do not have access to dentists whatsoever. The issue has always been prevalent, said Pourat, but she wonders what can be done to increase dental care to those under-served areas.

From a practice perspective, Pourat can see the appeal in setting up in a city, and how some dentists try to “maximize their income.”

Pourat believes that the national ratio of dentists to residents is reasonable, when considering how many patients a dentist can see. But, as Bruce Yeager knows through working for the Coachella Valley Volunteers in Medicine, oral procedures take time.

“Dentistry just takes longer,” Yeager said, but the challenge comes with which patients should be seen first.

Free clinics are still a viable option for those in need of oral care. Coachella Valley Volunteers in Medicine has two fully-equipped dental exam areas and sees about 500 patients every month.

To be seen at the clinic, a patient must be a Coachella Valley resident, have no access to and no eligibility for any form of health insurance, and their household income must be 200 percent of the federal poverty

level or below.

There is a six- to eight-month waiting list to be seen by one of the clinic's volunteer dentists, Yeager said. There are about four or five dentists that practice at the clinic, but they have irregular schedules. Dental hygienists and local students also volunteer their time.

Cost is a big deterrent for those in need of dental care. Although experts stress the importance of oral health, many of those without coverage put off care in order to deal with more immediate financial obligations. An alternative may be to seek treatment at a local emergency room clinic, but at the expense of taxpayers. It creates a nasty cycle to keep putting it off, said Yeager, the clinic's director.

"When Jan. 1 rolls around, and people have their insurance, we're still going to have plenty of folks that are going to need us," he said.

"Dental is in desperate need," said Rosa Lucas, a nurse practitioner for Eisenhower Urgent Care. "After Denti-Cal was over and the economy changed, and people who had been working started losing their jobs, we started to see people you would never have expected to see lining up for free care."

As a co-founder for the VIM clinic, Lucas has seen the urgent need for dentists.

Patients at the clinic aren't complaining of a cavity or two, said Lucas. Many are suffering from severe and long-term dental disease. "These things take a long time and several visits. Some of these people have never seen a dentist in their lives. Some haven't been to a dentist in many, many years. A lot of them are in pain."

When Denti-Cal ended non-emergency benefits in 2009, many people were left without dental coverage, which included cleanings, crowns, root canal procedures, dentures and fillings. However, Gov. Jerry Brown recently agreed on a budget plan that restores partial dental services to Medi-Cal starting in May 2014.

Dental services, like vision, will continue to be of great necessity as they remain uncovered, said Lucas.

Until dental care is reestablished as part of Medi-Cal, prevention and patience may be viable options for those who are not covered.

"In terms of specifically dental, I don't think folks realize how critical it is to their overall health," Yeager said. "And I don't know how you raise that awareness."

It may not be until 2014, when doctors, Riverside County citizens and policy makers can truly see what the ACA will do to the dental landscape.

"It's a complex law with complex regulations," Lindsey Robinson said. "We really don't know how it's going to impact us as providers and us as business people as well."