

Keeping our Community Smiling
By Max Rusek

Nationally, dental disease affects nearly half of children ages 6-15, which includes decayed or missing teeth. According to the *American Journal of Public Health*, children with dental disease are more likely to miss time at school and are four times more likely to have a GPA below the national median of 2.8. Oral health is an integral part of overall health and dental issues can affect a child's nutrition, self-esteem, or exacerbate other medical conditions. In addition, children of lower socio-economic status often have limited access to dental services to address their dental issues. The *Mendocino County Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health Needs Assessment* showed that children ages 2 to 11 in Lake and Mendocino Counties visit the dentist less frequently than children elsewhere in the state. This lack of access combined with dental disease creates a cycle that negatively affects children and their health outcomes in Mendocino County. Mendocino Community Health Clinics (MCHC) aims to break the cycle by providing free oral health education, dental screening and fluoride varnishing services each year to students at local schools through the Smiles Program.

The Smiles Program reaches over 2,300 preschool and elementary school students annually in Ukiah, Willits and Lakeport. MCHC targets schools with at least half of the student population on free or reduced lunch plans to reach children who are most vulnerable or at risk. The Smiles Program utilizes education, screening and varnish services in concert to help address health issues that affect children. Dr. Doug Lewis, Dental Director for MCHC, strongly emphasizes that the Smiles Program should demonstrate that oral health is integral to overall health. "Here at MCHC, we are committed to providing holistic services to the community we serve, and the Smiles Program reflects that," stated Dr. Lewis. "In my mind, one of the primary roles of the Mendocino Community Health Clinics, and community health centers in general, is to be engaged in promoting community health – focusing on prevention and being an active community resource." In Mendocino County, 52.2 percent of 5th graders are above their target healthy weight according to the California Department of Education – a statistic not lost on Dr. Lewis. "Healthy people make healthy communities. We aim to care for those in need, empower people and address prevalent issues through our services at MCHC."

At each school this year, MCHC HealthCorps member Tom Fuchs first provided age-appropriate comprehensive oral health education to students, modifying his lesson for each grade level. Fuchs worked this year to incorporate material explaining the importance of having a balanced diet and avoiding sugary foods into the lessons. He detailed to the students how sugar and poor oral health practices can cause dental disease. He encouraged students to be mindful of how their diet choices affect their health – illustrating the connections between oral health and overall health. Fuchs explained how sugary foods can affect not only teeth, but weight and the potential onset of disease. "It has been a great experience to be a part of providing this valuable service," he reflected when asked about presenting the education material. "It's amazing how engaged the children were during the lesson – the kids had great questions and I'm glad to have had the opportunity to interact with them."

After Fuchs provided the education portion of the Smiles Program, MCHC dental staff visited the same classrooms at a later date to provide free dental screenings and fluoride varnishes. The screenings help

alert parents of potential dental problems and the varnishing provides a protective coating to help prevent cavities. “I’m proud to say that the staff looks forward to going into the schools and I regularly get very positive feedback,” said Becky Driscoll, MCHC’s Dental Department Manager and coordinator of the Smiles Program. “There is an understanding of how valuable the Smiles Program is to some of the children and we’re all glad to have an impact.”

Children with healthy teeth can be spared the pain and developmental setbacks that dental disease can bring. “It is a cliché - but prevention is the best medicine,” said Dr. Lewis. “The earlier we can intervene and provide dental services to these kids, the better it is for the kids, their families and the community.” The hope is that teaching healthy habits, instilling the importance of good oral health and addressing dental issues will empower the children of Lake and Mendocino Counties to take control of their own health and avoid costly health issues in the future.

MCHC reaches out to local schools through the Smiles Program each year and provides dental care to children at all three of its health centers. For more information, visit mchcinc.org or call (707) 468-1010.

Max Rusek is currently serving with AmeriCorps Community HealthCorps at the Hillside Health Center in Ukiah, CA. A Wisconsin native, he hopes to attend medical school in the future and has thoroughly enjoyed the time he’s spent in Mendocino County this year.



Tom Fuchs at Frank Zeek Elementary School



MCHC dental staff applying varnish at Frank Zeek Elementary School