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LaVallee's angels

Hygienists reaching out to fight tooth decay

By Judy Yeaton

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WINTHROP — Susanne LaVallee and her colleagues don't leave money under children's pillows in exchange for teeth but they do visit them to check on their incisors and bicuspids.

Dental hygienists rather than tooth fairies, the women work to make sure youngsters keep their teeth for as long as possible and they do that job at schools. And since they treat children who have no other access to dental care, LaVallee calls them tooth angels and they deliver their services through Maine Dental Out-Reach Inc., the nonprofit corporation founded by the Winthrop resident.

"I said to myself, 'there's public health status out there and I can help these people, and I'm going to do it,'"
- Susanne LaVallee

Delivering services under the public health supervision part of the Maine law that regulates dental hygienist practice, the outreach hygienists can provide care in the schools because the law allows them to treat people in settings other than dentists' offices. Thus, they can clean teeth, give fluoride treatments, put in temporary fillings, apply sealants, and teach children to floss and brush their teeth correctly while at their schools. Students who receive outreach care are those without dentists either because there aren't any in their area who accept MaineCare reimbursement or their parents can't get them to appointments, LaVallee said.

The outreach hygienists, on the other hand, work out of a mobile unit that holds two dental hygiene treatment rooms. It's a used RV that LaVallee found in Uncle Henry's. With help from her husband, Tim, and an equity loan she took out on their house, she renovated it and installed two dental chairs and other dental equipment. It remains parked at a school for as long it takes for Susanne and the other hygienists to treat every student who is eligible for their services there. It can be at a school anywhere from a day to a month, depending upon students' dental needs, before the unit is moved to the next school on its schedule, Susanne explained.



Dental hygienist Susanne LaVallee examines the teeth of student Sadie Storer, 8, in the Maine Dental Health Out-Reach Inc. mobile unit parked outside Jay Elementary School.

“We are where the children are. We’re not dependent on the parents bringing them to us. This is why this works,” she said.



Dental hygienists Susanne LaVallee and Tracy Crocker, from left, stand outside the Maine Dental Health Out-Reach Inc. mobile unit they work out of when parked at area schools. Other hygienists on the team include Joann Moulton, Lee Boone, Heather Corson and Jessica McGinty.

The schools that Susanne, the only full-time hygienist, and five part-time hygienists travel to throughout the area include Augusta, Hall-Dale, Gardiner, Litchfield, Winthrop and Monmouth. They refer children who need more extensive dental work than they're qualified to provide to a dentist, an orthodontist or an oral surgeon. However, since the doctors who work with the outreach program agree to treat a child for one time only, the program is always looking for more dentists willing to do pro bono work.

"We have 20 dental offices we can call for dental care and we've had over \$20,000 in donated dental care just in the last year," she said.

In order to administer dental hygiene care outside a traditional dental practice, the outreach team of hygienists is required by law to be overseen by a public health dentist supervisor, which is Augusta dentist Dr. Barbara Oesterlin.

Although devoted to providing public health dental hygiene through the outreach program she created, Susanne followed the traditional path of a dental hygienist after graduating from Northeastern University and Forsyth Dental Hygiene School in 1982. She worked in dentists' offices and was happy working for Dr. Thomas Lee of Farmingdale whose practice was the last one she worked in before going into public health. She'd been working with Lee for more than 12 years when, in December 2002 the 52-year-old dentist suddenly died, leaving Susanne devastated but also out of work.



The Maine Dental Health Out-Reach, Inc. Mobile unit is an RV that was converted into two, completely equipped, dental hygiene treatment rooms.

"I lost my job, I lost a good friend, and I lost patients who were like a family," she said.

It was some of those patients, however, that steered her toward mobile-dental care. Soon after Lee died, parents of his MaineCare patients called his office to lament that they couldn't find dentists who would treat their children. Remembering that she received a brochure months before from the Department of Health and Human Services, Maine Oral Health Program explaining changes in the law regarding public health supervision of dental hygienists, Susanne found the information, read it over, and had a revelation.

Initially, Susanne called the venture she started in January 2003 Tooth Angels. Even though she was the only hygienist working under that name, she pluralized it because she believed her former boss was still guiding her work.

"He may be invisible, but he's not gone," she said of Lee.

Susanne saw her first patient as a public health dental hygienist in March 2003 through Healthy Futures in Winthrop. Then she started calling the school nurses in the area, explaining the service she had to offer and asking if it would be of benefit to any of their students.

“Monmouth was the first school I called and the school nurse said, ‘come on down,’” Susanne said.

That was five years ago. At the time, 40 percent of the students she saw in Monmouth had tooth decay. Last year when the outreach hygienists were at the school, only 11 percent had decay and fewer students were seeing the school nurse for tooth problems, Susanne said.

Each school they go to sends consent forms for dental hygiene care home with the students to be filled out and signed by their parents. Susanne sorts through the returned forms for those who have MaineCare coverage and don’t have a dentist. Students who have dentists, regardless of whether they’re a MaineCare recipient or not, are ineligible for her program’s services, Susanne explained.

“As the outreach program evolves, the more consent forms we get,” she said.

The program has served 2,400 children since it began and yet there are still some children who fall through the cracks. Their teeth never get looked at by a dental professional because their parents’ incomes are too high to qualify for MaineCare and too low to pay for dental care out of pocket. For that reason and many others, Susanne obtained not-for-profit status (501c3), making the outreach program a charitable organization. By doing so, she can pursue other sources of funding, such as grants and private donations, rather than be dependent upon MaineCare reimbursement, which can be unreliable and doesn’t cover all of the hygienists’ services or all of the children who need them, she said.

With the change in status Susanne also changed the organization’s name from Tooth Angels to Maine Dental Health Out-Reach Inc., but its spirit and mission remain the same. She and the rest of the outreach team of dental hygienists will always be tooth angels.

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