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Weymouth dentists donate free dental care to patients

By Maribeth Conway

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WEYMOUTH — Most people don't get too excited about seeing the dentist, but this weekend, they were lining up for the chance.

Volunteer medical staff held a free dental clinic at South Shore Dentistry in Weymouth on Sunday, treating more than 100 people with donated cleanings, fillings and tooth extractions valued at more than \$30,000.

"People have lost their insurance, they've lost jobs, and they are losing their homes," said Dr. Larry Burt, who organized the event.

One elderly male patient told volunteers that he has pulled five of his own teeth in the past year because he was suffering extreme pain.

Staff made an exception to their one-treatment-per-person policy and pulled five more teeth for the man. He had told them he would pull the teeth himself – with pliers if necessary.

A woman desperate to have a painful tooth pulled from her mouth parked in the South Shore Dentistry parking lot at 1 a.m. Sunday morning, to ensure she didn't miss out on the free dental work. The doors didn't open until 7 a.m.

By 2:30 p.m., more than 100 people without dental insurance had been treated.

Burt has volunteered his dental expertise throughout his career, even flying to Pakistan, but he has never helped those so close to home.

"For me to spend five to 10 minutes giving a filling is nothing, but it's a huge difference to you," Burt said.

Hearing the stories of patients humbled the volunteer staff, particularly when three U.S. veterans walked through the office's doors.

"They've been to war and have done all this for the country and have no insurance," said Malissa Felix, a dental assistant.

The office calculated that more than \$30,000 worth of services were donated, plus a 10-hour workday. Dentists from other South Shore practices also volunteered, including Dr. Robin Feltoon, who has an office in Hanover, and Dr. Nick Sowls and Dr. Tim Colton who run Norwell offices. Dr. Robert Solomon, a periodontist, also volunteered his time.

The dentists reached out to local social services programs in advance to get word out to those who cannot afford dental care, but many of Sunday's customers have jobs and homes but are still hurting from cutbacks in their insurance plans.

Frances Christino had dental insurance for more than 30 years and said she visited the dentist four times a year, until her dental insurance was cut. Before Sunday, Christino hadn't been to a dentist in two years. Her daughter Elisabeth also received a free teeth cleaning since her college health insurance plan doesn't offer dental coverage. Elisabeth waited about an hour and a half for the cleaning which usually costs about \$170.

More than 30 volunteers pitched in Sunday, some turning up as early as 5:30 a.m. but dental hygienist Beverly Baker said the long day was worth the effort because of the compensation they received: the smiles.

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So the legislature plans to cut adult dental coverage from Mass Health effective July 1st. What about those foster children who age out of the system and need fillings etc? We see here clearly that lack of dental coverage is resulting in fewer dental visits , and poorer overall oral health.

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