Dental Care and Education for Uninsured Patients

The Challenge: Uninsured people in Milwaukee struggle to find quality and affordable dental care. Few providers are available to serve the poor; and community-based preventive and treatment programs are not widely available. And unfortunately, poor oral health has been linked to a number of health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and respiratory infection.

Description: The Bread of Healing Clinic, a free clinic on the north side of Milwaukee, set out to increase the accessibility of affordable dental services in the area. This project sought to develop a replicable system for oral health education and services for uninsured, low-income patients. The project recruited volunteer dentists, dental hygienists and students to perform assessments, X-rays, cleanings and oral evaluations, and made referrals to dentists for dental services.

Results: This grant allowed 215 patients to receive dental care; many required multiple visits due to the extent of their needs. During the project period, dentists performed 1,200 procedures, most of which were fillings and extractions.

Patients received oral health education while in the waiting room. The oral health education addressed the importance of dental health in maintaining overall health. Patients’ oral health knowledge was assessed using pre-test and post-test measures. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 indicating greater knowledge, patients scored an average of 6.83 on the pre-test and 8.25 on the post-test. Findings from a quality of life survey and interviews were very positive overall, with some patients expressing that they were no longer in pain and were able to smile again without feeling self-conscious about the condition of their teeth.

While substantial efforts to recruit professional volunteers were noteworthy, a complementary state grant enabled the clinic to hire part-time dentists and hygienists to provide additional hours of care to patients beyond what was previously offered solely through volunteers. The project team is currently working with the Milwaukee County Oral Health Task Force to identify and scale-up affordable oral health strategies.