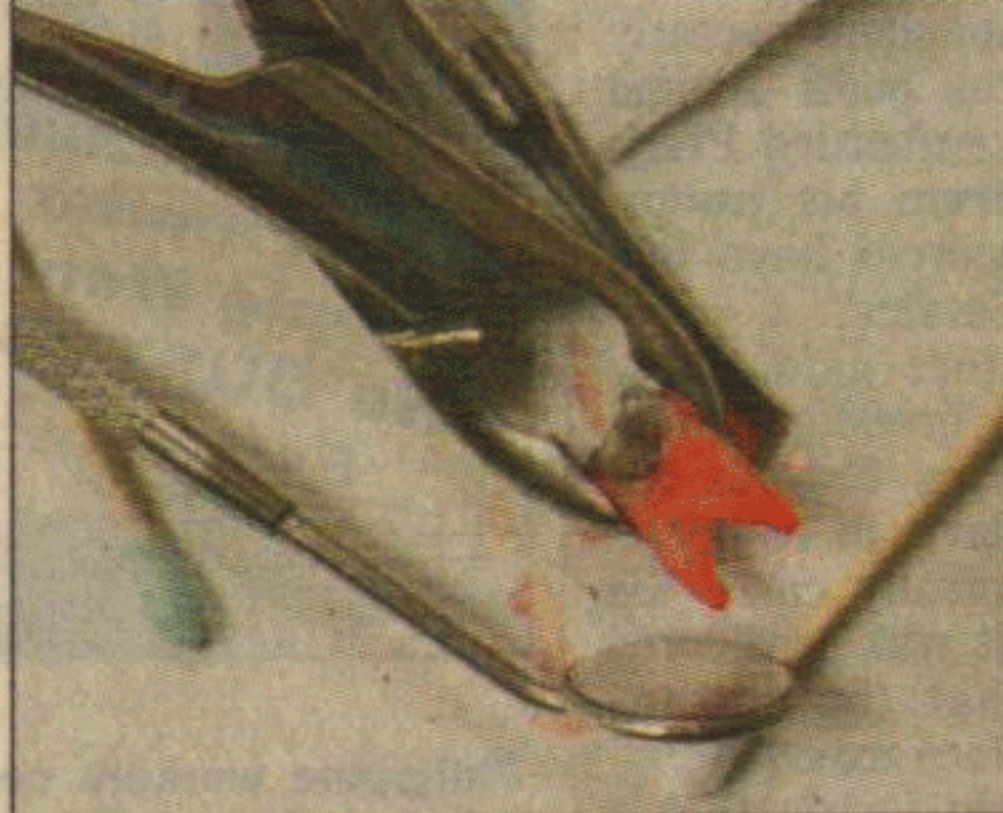


Feeling their pain

More than 40 dentists take turns volunteering at the Union Gospel Mission's free dental clinic, a last resort for many low-income, uninsured people.



Most of the people who come to the Union Gospel Mission dental clinic end up having teeth pulled. There is no time to perform more complicated procedures.



PIONEER PRESS PHOTOS BY RICHARD MARSHALL

"Ooohhh, I'm scared to death," says Judy Banaszak, 50, as Dr. Leroy Hipp prepares to extract an infected tooth recently at Union Gospel Mission's dental clinic. "I'm just getting 'em pulled, one at a time, and this'll be the first one I'm awake for," she said. Banaszak has had most of her teeth pulled, all under general anesthetic.

MAJA BECKSTROM STAFF WRITER

The two dozen people in the overcrowded waiting room at the Union Gospel Mission's free dental clinic do not chat or read. They simply stare straight ahead in their own world of pain. Few things concentrate the attention like an abscessed tooth.

Harold Ryman has one molar left and now it is cracked to below the gum line.

"I've used up a half bottle of this stuff just today," he said, as he pulled a vial of over-the-counter anesthetic from his coat pocket.

"It's got so bad I can't sleep."

Finally at 6:30 p.m., relief arrives with the dentists.

Since 1993, volunteer dentists from the St. Paul District Dental Society have provided free care every Monday evening in the basement clinic of the mission on the outskirts of downtown St. Paul.

The waiting room provides a glimpse into the serious problems that plague many low-income adults who cannot afford a visit to the dentist.



The hands of oral surgeon Dr. Asif Rahman wield a scraper and mirror as he inspects the abscessed molar of Harold Ryman, 46.

DENTISTS CONTINUED ON 3A ▶



RICHARD MARSHALL/PIONEER PRESS

"Good as new. Tomorrow I'm gonna eat me a big thick steak," says Harold Ryman after Dr. Asif Rahman pulled an abscessed molar from his mouth at Union Gospel Mission's dental clinic.

months.

The society, which is the local chapter of the Minnesota Dental Association and covers Ramsey, Dakota, Washington and Chisago

counties, pays for an assistant. It also just started renovating the treatment rooms and replacing outdated equipment at a cost of \$250,000. Donations have come

from foundations, companies such as Patterson Dental Supply and many individuals.

Dentist Leroy Hipp is working in one of two half-finished gleaming new rooms. After he went on a church mission trip to Jamaica five years ago, he looked for ways to volunteer closer to home.

"As you get along in years, you realize that old cliché is true," says Hipp, who lives in Mahtomedi and has a practice in downtown St. Paul.

"You get more satisfaction from giving something back than from taking."

Hipp slides an X-ray on the viewing screen and shows Judy Banaszak why her molar is driving her crazy. She has a huge cavity and advanced gum disease.

Banaszak, 50, was laid off from her cashier job in November, just shy of her year anniversary when she would have been eligible for dental insurance, she says. Now she is covered by Medical Assistance. She is among the growing number of people with government dental insurance who are showing up at the clinic because

they cannot find dentists who will take them.

Government programs do not reimburse dentists for the full cost of treating someone, and, as a result, most practices exclude or limit the number of public program patients they treat.

"I went through the phonebook calling for an appointment," Banaszak says, as she waits for the Novocain to kick in. "I started at the first page of dentists and went all the way to the end. No. No. No. No. No." She finally found someone who would see her — but not until February, she says.

One of the last patients to be seen just before 9 p.m. is Ryman, a 46-year old man with gray streaked hair that hangs long in the back. He also had trouble finding someone who would accept his government dental coverage. He cannot work, he says, because he has a mental illness.

After his tooth is pulled, as he walks out through the empty waiting room, he passes something to the Rev. Wally Kowitz, the Union Gospel Mission chaplain. It's a \$20 donation for the clinic.

Low-income people get less care

MAJA BECKSTROM STAFF WRITER

Low-income adults who rely on government programs for dental insurance get far fewer services than the general population, according to a report submitted to the state Legislature this week.

Fewer than a quarter of people who are enrolled in Medical Assistance, Minnesota Care or General Assistance received dental care in 1999, compared with nearly three quarters of people who have commercial insurance.

And the disparity is growing, according to James Chase, who oversees dental and other medical services for public programs at the state Department of Human Services.

"It is a problem you see nationwide," said Chase. "While people have dental coverage, it is sometimes difficult to find a dentist who is willing to accept public program participants."

Government programs reimburse dentists for 55 percent of what they normally would charge. As a result, many dentists exclude or limit the number of such patients they treat. Out of the 2,800 practicing dentists in Minnesota, about 45 percent did not see any patients in 1999 who had government insurance, Chase said.

Dentists say the reimbursement rate does not even cover their overhead. Also, patients who are on public programs are more likely to miss appointments. Meanwhile, policy makers note that the state already pays \$70 million to \$80 million annually for dental programs, and they are concerned that simply raising the rate would not result in more people being served.

Children face similar problems getting dental care. A recent national survey conducted by the Urban Institute, a research organization based in Washington D.C., found that 1 in 5 children in Minnesota had not seen a dentist during the previous year and nearly 10 percent had unmet dental needs. The needs were highest among low-income children, children who were uninsured, older children and children with less educated parents.

The Dental Access Advisory Committee, which was created by the Legislature and set up by the Department of Human Services, recommends:

- Raising the reimbursement rate for dentists who serve more low-income patients.

- Increasing the number of dentists by training more dentists locally and loosening restrictions that prohibit qualified foreign-trained dentists from practicing in Minnesota.

- Creating a school loan forgiveness program for dentists willing to serve primarily low-income patients.

- Training dental hygienists to provide some services at a lower cost, using nurse practitioners as a model.

▼ CONTINUED FROM 1A

They come with swollen gums, rotting teeth and fractured molars. And, according to a report submitted to the state Legislature this week, their access to care is shrinking.

Some are employed but lack dental insurance. Others, like Ryman, are insured through government programs but cannot find dentists to treat them. Some have tried to get an appointment at one of several swamped community clinics only to be told the first available slot is two weeks away. So, they end up here, the place of last resort.

The first to be seated is Glen Kult. He came straight from his job as a forklift operator to wait in line at 4 p.m. Two-and-a-half hours later, he reclines in the dentist's chair in dirty brown coveralls. The father of three does not have dental insurance through work and says he cannot afford to pay a dentist. Like everyone who walks through these doors, he laughs at the idea of preventive care. He is 37 and guesses that he last saw a dentist in high school.

"Whad'ya got?" asks Richfield dentist John Woell as he pulls on a paper mask. Woell is one of two dentists and an oral surgeon volunteering tonight.

"I got a busted tooth," says Kult.

"Does it hurt?"

"Ooohhh yeah. From here to here," Kult says, tracing a line from his ear to his chin.

After taking an X-ray, Woell turns the job over to oral surgeon Asif Rahman, who handles the more difficult cases. Rahman sticks a pair of forceps into Kult's gaping mouth and rocks the tooth back and forth.

"You're doing good," Rahman says soothingly. "It's coming along. . . . You're a great patient."

Crack! The tooth breaks from the bone. Kult thanks them profusely and is sent home with a couple of packets of gauze.

Like Kult, most of the people who come to the clinic end up having teeth pulled. There is simply no time to perform root canals or complicated procedures that may require several return visits. There is no time to fit dentures or clean teeth. In fact, on this night, all but 15 people with the most pressing problems are sent home.

The Union Gospel Mission has housed the city's only free dental clinic for decades. In the 1970s, University of Minnesota dental students treated patients under supervision two nights a week. In 1993, the students cut back to just Wednesday night and the St. Paul Dental Society stepped in to cover Monday. They have treated more than 8,000 patient in those eight years.

Now more than 40 dentists volunteer, usually once every three

TO HELP Contributions earmarked "Dental Clinic Renovations" may be sent to Union Gospel Mission, 435 University Ave. E., St. Paul, MN 55101.