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A Healthy Body Requires a Healthy Mouth

By Fred Kiga and Sally Nixon

Imagine living every day in pain. Your mouth hurts and you can't eat anything except soft foods. You don't feel like doing anything or seeing anybody. This is the experience of many seniors suffering from oral disease and too often there is little help available.

It is no wonder the U.S. Surgeon General has called oral disease a "silent epidemic." Consider the following:

- It is estimated that one of every five seniors has untreated cavities.
- Nearly one-quarter of seniors age 65 to 74 have severe gum (periodontal) disease.
- Among low-income seniors, nearly 40 percent are at risk for tooth loss.

And the extent of the problem is poised to get much worse. The first baby boomer recently applied for Social Security. The onslaught of the baby boom generation, the so-called "silver tsunami," is underway. We need to move quickly to get programs in place that will help protect the health of older adults — and this includes protecting their oral health.

Oral disease is not just a cosmetic issue, it is a serious health concern. Poor oral health can increase the risk for pneumonia, a leading cause of death for seniors, and is associated with diabetic complications and increased risk for heart attacks and strokes.

The good news is that our community is taking steps to begin addressing this problem. In November the sixth annual Pierce County Oral Health Summit was held to discuss ongoing efforts to improve oral health. Preventing children's dental disease has been a key focus. Now seniors' oral health is starting to get some much-deserved attention as well.

One promising new development is the opening in Federal Way of a low-cost dental clinic exclusively for seniors, the first of its kind in the state. The nonprofit Geriatric Dental Group provides care to patients 55 years and older and those requiring a wheelchair accessible facility. Already they have appointments booked into March.

The Pierce County Dentists Care program is sponsored by the Pierce County Dental Society to help meet the oral health needs of low-income, underserved children and adults. Volunteer dentists provide care at no cost and many of the adults served are over 55.

Advocates are also exploring ways to ensure that oral health becomes integrated into overall health by encouraging collaboration between dentists and physicians. This is important because many seniors are more apt to see a doctor than they are to visit a dentist. Ensuring that physicians' pay attention to oral health and refer patients to a dentist if necessary will help improve overall health for older adults.

Raising awareness about the importance of good oral health for seniors is the goal of a statewide TV and radio advertising campaign sponsored by Washington Dental Service Foundation and the ElderCare Alliance (12 organizations representing more than 300,000 elders and their families throughout Washington). The campaign is urging support for cost-effective measures to prevent oral disease and improve health for seniors.

Several factors combine to put seniors at high risk for oral disease. With age, gums recede, increasing the risk of root decay. Root decay can lead to broken teeth, infections, pain, impaired chewing and nutritional problems. Older adults also are at a high risk for a serious condition called xerostomia or "dry mouth." Seven out of 10 commonly prescribed medications for seniors cause dry mouth, which can quickly lead to tooth decay and gum disease.

Over time oral disease grows increasingly painful and more expensive to treat, draining limited incomes and tight health care budgets. Medicare does not cover routine dental services, including prevention. Many seniors must pay for their dental care out-of-pocket, which can be a significant burden to those living on a fixed income. As a result, when prioritizing needs, seniors often overlook their oral health unaware they may be jeopardizing their overall health. The reality is you are not healthy if your mouth is not healthy.

The initial small steps that have been taken to improve seniors' oral health need to be expanded — and quickly. The impending silver tsunami is a wake-up call to increase efforts to keep older adults healthy. In most cases, oral disease is preventable and prevention will save money for seniors and taxpayers. It is much less expensive to prevent this disease than to pay for treatment, especially when the disease contributes to other serious, chronic health problems such as diabetes and heart disease.

As a community we need to support efforts to improve oral health so older adults can remain healthy and active. The bottom line is, good oral health for older adults is a necessity, not a luxury.

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