

## **Give Kids A Smile® Letter to the Editor**

**By Dr. Richard Wiberg, president, Minnesota Dental Association**

Consider this: You are a teenager. You have a toothache but can't afford dental treatment. The toothache is causing such discomfort that you are willing to take four city buses across town to be cared for by a dentist willing to see you for free.

Or consider this: You are an immigrant parent of a first grader. Your child has a hurting mouth but you have no money to pay to see a dentist. You save money for a month to pay for the dental care. And now, your child has such a severe problem that the only solution is to extract the tooth.

These stories seem implausible in this nation with the richest available health care. And yet, these are real-life stories from right here in Minnesota and what we dentists see and hear with increasing frequency.

This is what has inspired me and 1,500 other dental professional to open our offices and clinics to provide completely free dental care to children. On Feb. 2 and 3, the dental community will provide free care to needy children at more than 180 locations throughout Minnesota. We have reserved thousands of appointments to provide screenings, cleanings, fluoride treatments, sealants and fillings.

This marks our fifth consecutive year of this innovative assistance program, called "Give Kids a Smile." Through the volunteer efforts of the dental community, free dental care has been provided to more than 20,000 children whose families cannot otherwise afford dental care.

Minnesota dentists are committed to providing all children with dental care. This heart-warming and inspirational program is one way we live out this commitment. Most of my colleagues also have children and families they regularly treat for free in their communities. But volunteerism and charity care alone will not solve these problems.

Currently, there is a big push at the Legislature to reform health care. While dentistry is only 5 percent of the health care dollar, dental care is critical. Research shows that tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease, affecting 50 percent of U.S. first graders. Nationally, more than one-half of children ages 6 to 8 have tooth decay, and one-third of it goes untreated. We can do better than that.

The Minnesota Dental Association has convened a task force on universal health care that will soon make recommendations to the Legislature. The temptation is always to focus on the payment system for health care. But my hope is that much of the discussion at the Legislature will focus on deciding what is the essence of good basic dental care that our children need and deserve. My wish is not just for a program called "Give Kids a Smile," but a solution which would give ALL kids a smile.

If you know a child seeking care, invite him or her to schedule an appointment by calling United Way 211 (just dial 2-1-1). Information on specific services that will be provided will be outlined when an appointment is scheduled. Patients seeking appointments should be under the age of 18 and accompanied by a parent or legal guardian.

Together, we can make a difference.