

Extracting Kindness, one tooth at a time



Carole Whitmer, Barbara Ward-Burkitt of the Native Friendship Centre, Dr. Richard Wilczek and Gloria Gardner pose for a photo at the Emergency Dental Outreach Clinic in the Native Friendship Centre.

– BRENT BRAATEN, PHOTOGRAPHER

Stuart Neatby / Prince George Citizen

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The two founders of Prince George's only free dental clinic say the key ingredient to keeping the service in operation has been the dedication of their volunteers.

Dr. Richard Wilczek and Carole Whitmer, the administrators of the Emergency Dental Outreach Clinic, say the clinic is almost entirely kept afloat because of volunteer dentists, hygienists and assistants. The clinic has one part-time staff coordinator, and operates rent-free from its office at the Prince George Native Friendship Centre. The clinic opens twice a month, on the evenings of the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month.

In 2017, volunteers administered \$72,000 worth of free treatment to low-income residents from Prince George, according to Wilczek. Some patients come from as far away as Quesnel, Williams Lake, McBride and Dawson Creek. According to Wilczek, the clinic is B.C.'s only free dental clinic north of Kamloops.

The clinic mainly offers extractions, often referring more complicated procedures elsewhere.

For many, these procedures alleviate pain from infected or decaying teeth.

Wilczek said the clinic's mainstay patients over the last 12 years have been individuals who are earning a paycheque, but who still cannot afford dental care.

"We thought we'd be getting street people. That's what we envisioned in our minds when we were setting up a plan. Our primary clientele is the working poor," Wilczek said.

Patients are not screened for income, Wilczek said, and are only asked if they have reasons as to why procedures might harm their health.

According to Wilczek, the clinic was originally the brainchild of Whitmer.

"It was Carol's idea," Wilczek told The Citizen on Tuesday night, as patients lined up in the hallway outside the first-come, first-serve clinic. "She was working at Vincent De Paul serving the lunch lineup."

Whitmer said the idea for the clinic originally came to her after watching students from the College of New Caledonia's dental hygienics program handing out toothbrushes and floss in the downtown.

CNC students often hand out oral health tools to homeless residents as part of oral health promotion events.

"So they were going around with the toothbrushes, handing them out and thinking they were going a great job. Which they were. But then I heard someone say 'where do I put my toothbrush? I don't have a home.'"

Whitmer then began asking homeless and low-income residents of Prince George where they would go if they had a cavity or were experiencing severe toothaches. Most said they would go to emergency.

“What emergency would do is just give them pain medication or antibiotics. Just a Bandaid,” Whitmer said.

The idea of a clinic for low-income residents has since grown to become a regular, bi-weekly service, funded in large part by a \$10,000 annual grant from Northern Health. Most of the supplies are donated, the hygienists and dentists’ time is donated, and the rent is covered by the Native Friendship Centre.

Although some patients are able to offer donations for their treatment, the clinic has been able to fill a significant gap in the healthcare system on little more than a shoestring budget.

With the exception of holidays, the clinic has managed to maintain a remarkable consistency, having never missed a day due to absent volunteers.

“We’ve never had to shut down the clinic in the 12 years,” Wilczek said.

Wilczek estimates that the volunteers work two shifts per year on average.

Despite this feat of modern administration, both Wilczek and Whitmer are quick to throw credit for the clinic’s success squarely on the shoulder of volunteers and their partners with the Native Friendship Centre.

“Without those two, without the volunteers and without the Native Friendship Centre, we couldn’t run this thing,” Wilczek said.

The Emergency Dental Outreach Clinic is open from 6 p.m. to

8 p.m. on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month and can be contacted at 250-613-7246.