

Erie County health department hits road for dental screenings

By David Bruce

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A new program provides free dental screenings and cleanings to Head Start students.

CORRY — Alex Miller tattled on his sister, wore sunglasses indoors and guessed that he had 13 teeth in his mouth.

The 5-year-old Corry boy also had his teeth examined, cleaned and coated with fluoride Wednesday at the St. Thomas Education Center. Electronic images of his teeth were sent to a dentist in Erie for examination as part of the Erie County Department of Health's new teledentistry program.

"Alex, do you have any wiggly teeth?" asked Karen Omniewski, a public health dental hygiene practitioner who conducts the program's dental screenings.

"No, but my sister does," Alex said as he climbed onto the portable dental chair Omniewski set up in the education center's former cafeteria. "She eats a lot of junk food and that's why she has all the wiggly teeth."

Alex was one of 13 Erie County Head Start preschool students in Corry who had dental screenings Wednesday. The free screenings are given to any Head Start student who hasn't seen a dentist in at least a year.

The teledentistry program started in December as an outreach of the health department's dental clinic. Funding from the federal government's Health Resources and Services Administration, Hamot Health Foundation and Erie County government pay for the services, which are provided at Head Start programs around the county.



Five-year-old dental patient Alex Miller has pictures of his teeth taken by Karen Omniewski, a public health dental hygiene practitioner with the Erie County Department of Health, during a teledentistry visit in Corry last week. The images, displayed at the top right of the photo can be seen by an off-site dentist to help diagnose dental problems [Greg Wohlford/Erie Times-News]



Alex Miller, 5 looks at images of his teeth with Karent Omniewski [Greg Wohlford/Erie Times-News]



Dental patient Alex Miller, 5, waits for a public health dental hygiene practitioner with the Erie County Department of Health to check his teeth during a teledentistry visit in Corry. The practitioner, Karen Omniewski, had given Miller the stuffed animal to show how he brushed his teeth. [Greg Wohlford/Erie Times-News]

“This is Karen’s initiative in recognizing a way to get better service and a great opportunity to give dental care out in the field,” said Charlotte Berringer, R.N., director of community health for the health department.

Poor dental health among children in low-income families is a nationwide epidemic. About one-third of children between the ages of 2 and 5 who live below federal poverty guidelines have untreated tooth decay, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Untreated cavities can lead to tooth abscesses, infections around the tooth’s root. These abscesses can be painful and the infection can spread, leading in rare cases to sepsis, a life-threatening medical emergency.

“I saw three abscesses out of 11 children at a previous stop,” Omniewski said. “That’s why young children need to have their teeth examined and cleaned, even though these are not their permanent teeth.”

Before Omniewski cleaned Alex’s teeth, she handed him a pair of sunglasses to protect his eyes from any flying flecks of toothpaste. She also asked the boy how many teeth he had.

“Six,” Alex said.

“Let’s count,” Omniewski said. “You have 10 on top. How many do you have on the bottom row?”

“Seven,” Alex said.

“OK, let’s see,” Omniewski said. “It’s 10, just like the top row and just like the number of fingers and toes you have.”

Once Omniewski was finished cleaning Alex’s teeth, she had him open his mouth “big like a dinosaur” so that she could take digital photos of his teeth with a camera shaped like a pen flashlight.

The images appeared on a nearby laptop and were later sent to Erie dentist Cortney Archbold, who examines them within 72 hours. It appeared that Alex might have one cavity.



Karen Omniewski, a public dental health practitioner with the Erie County Department of Health. [Greg Wohlford/Erie Times-News]

“Dr. Cortney reads the photos and determines which ones need care,” Omniewski said. “She follows up with a phone call to a parent, tells them whether their child has decay and schedules a comprehensive exam if they agree.”

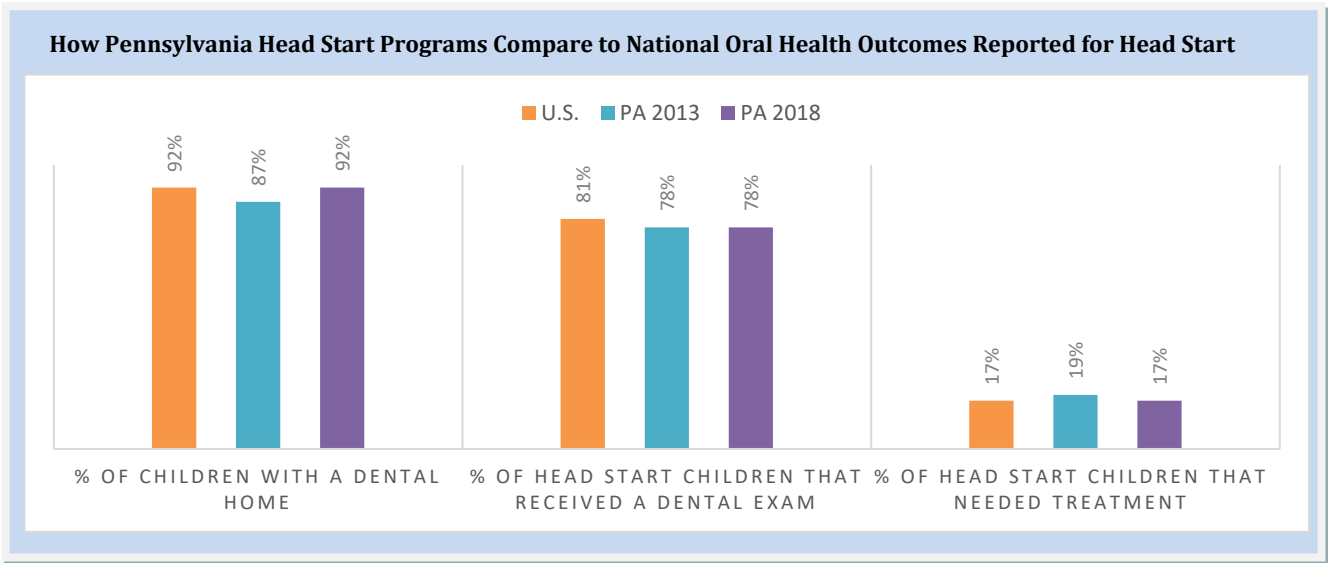
The follow-up dental exams and treatments aren’t free but they are paid for by Medicaid, which covers most of the county’s Head Start students, said Kathy Iszkula, health services coordinator for Erie County Head Start. Other students are covered by private dental insurance.

Omniewski has already visited the Head Start programs at St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church and the former St. John School in Erie, and will visit the Millcreek Head Start program at 2340 W. Grandview Blvd. on March 7.

Omniewski, 61, worked as a dental hygienist for 38 years before she was hired in June as the health department’s public health dental hygiene practitioner. She didn’t realize how many young children had significant tooth decay until she started working for the health department.

“This program is desperately needed,” Omniewski said as she waited for Iszkula to escort the next patient to her. “I really feel good about the work I am doing.”

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