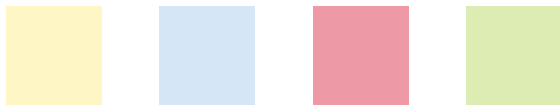


Tooth Taxi stories from the road . . .

THE REALITY OF Access to Dental Care for Oregon's Children

By Carrie Peterson



When the **TOOTH TAXI** launched in 2008, the most pervasive challenge facing children's access to care was lack of dental insurance. Today—in theory—all children in Oregon should have dental insurance. The reality is, however, that not only are some children still lacking coverage, many of the ones who do, aren't utilizing it.

Providing coverage removes the financial barrier for *some*, but not all. Transportation, taking time off of work, getting appointments in a timely fashion, and proximity of participating providers to the patient's home are still major barriers for these families. Over half of the children the Tooth Taxi serves come from families with an annual household income of \$20,000 or less. Missing work to take a child to the dentist is just not an option for them—the loss of income is a large hurdle.

These children are most at risk for dental decay, and are falling through the cracks of the system. The Tooth Taxi—and its partnership with schools—allows us to be an advocate for these children. Many have immediate dental needs that are causing discomfort, difficulty with eating, and distracting them from their education. We are removing many of the remaining barriers by providing comprehensive dental treatment and oral health education to children *at their school* so parents do not have to worry about transportation, making an appointment, or taking time off of work. At the end of the week we leave a visit summary which describes the treatment that was done, the value of services, whether the child's treatment is complete, who their insurance coverage is through, and a phone number they can call to find a provider.

For children who don't have insurance, we can also submit a referral to **THE CHILDREN'S PROGRAM**. This program,



Patricia Ridgley, DMD, with a patient on the Tooth Taxi

created by Moda Health, provides basic dental services for children between the ages of 5 and 18 who reside in Oregon, and are not covered under any dental plan.

In rural areas such as Douglas County, the need is overwhelming. **NINETY PERCENT of the students we screened at South Umpqua High School HAD DENTAL CARIES.** Out of this group, 16% needed an extraction of a permanent tooth and 26% needed a root canal on a permanent tooth. Most of the kids had dental insurance but reported a 3–6 month wait to be seen.

At Earl Boyles Elementary in Portland I had young boy tell me how glad he was that I came to get him because his tooth had really started to hurt. When we brought him on the Tooth Taxi to perform an exam, we noticed his mouth was visibly swollen and he had two active infections along with several other areas of decay. He had no dental insurance. The Tooth Taxi team was able to extract both of his infected teeth, place four fillings, and provide a cleaning—all without him needing to leave school.

Ideally all children would have access to regular dental care in a dental home. Sadly, this is not a reality for many of Oregon's children. Until it is, the Tooth Taxi will keep traveling across the state filling in the gaps where it can. 🦷

Carrie Peterson is Program Manager for the Tooth Taxi. She can be reached at CarriePeterson@modahealth.com.

The Tooth Taxi was created through a unique partnership with the Dental Foundation of Oregon, OEA Choice Trust, and Moda Health. To date, the Tooth taxi has provided more than \$4.8 million in dental services at no cost to the patients.

The Dental Foundation of Oregon is the charitable arm of the Oregon Dental Association. For more information, visit www.SmileOnOregon.org.

