

No dental insurance? No problem



David Denney, Star Tribune

Dr. Kathleen Swanson talks with 10-year-old Heng Po's mother Aun Hour, at left. At right is dental internist Jenny Overaas.

Dentists and hygienists around Minnesota are giving free care to thousands of kids who don't have insurance.

By **JOY PETERSEN**, Star Tribune

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Four-year-old Avril Garcia played in the waiting room of a dental clinic she'd never visited before Friday as her parents waited for a volunteer to call her name.

Avril's father, Willy Garcia, said he had heard from his daughter's school about a program that provided free dental care for uninsured kids.

"Two years ago I had to cancel my insurance because of the economy," said Garcia, of Brooklyn Park. "This is why we came."

The program, called "Give Kids a Smile," is sponsored by the American Dental Association. Dentists and dental hygienists across the country volunteered their time Friday and again today to treat uninsured children. The Minnesota Dental Association expected nearly 5,000 children to get free treatment across the state. Parents arranged appointments by calling a help line set up by the United Way or by contacting clinics directly.

Some clinics saw signs of rising need this year. A private practice in Edina, Edina 5-0 Dental, has participated in the program for three years, and in the past, appointments filled up over the course of a week, office administrator Joyce McClain said. This year, the office filled its calendar with 22 appointments in three days.

Jenni Hegge, coordinator of the event at Children's Dental Services in Minneapolis, where the Garcias had an appointment, said the event is a "fantastic thing," but "it's not enough."

At Children's Dental Services, patients don't leave without being given an opportunity to apply for state- or county-assisted dental insurance. Because of success in signing up families during past clinics, Children's Dental Services rarely has a young patient come back for the free clinic the next year, Hegge said.

Most of the young patients got a cleaning and a checkup. But some who had more severe problems had an additional appointment scheduled in the afternoon.

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