



Photographs courtesy of Children's Dental Health Clinic

CHILDREN'S DENTAL FOUNDATION /
CHILDREN'S DENTAL HEALTH CLINIC, INC.

For most people, getting a cavity filled is an unpleasant inconvenience. But for some of the children receiving care at the Children's Dental Health Clinic, tooth decay can be a matter of life and death.

Lack of access to quality care, poor nutrition and insufficient oral hygiene combine to create painful and sometimes life-threatening ailments in the mouths of children as young as two years old, said John Blake, executive director of the clinic, which is housed alongside Miller Children's Hospital in Long Beach.

An unfilled cavity can bore its way through the tooth and into the gum, creating an abscess that can infect the ears, nose, throat and brain, causing meningitis, severe pain, and in extreme cases, death. "These children come from families where the parents are focusing all of their energy on providing the basic necessities of life — food, shelter, clothing," Blake said. "Getting their kids to brush their teeth or to get an annual cleaning isn't always a priority. What you wind up with are children who need a great deal of intervention to get them out of harm's way."

Blake sees a dire case at least once a week, most often referred through the hospital emergency room. In patients so young however, extensive dental work would be all but impossible without intravenous (or IV) sedation — a procedure that may strike some as severe, but that is among the most critical of tools that enable dentists and hygienists to address the problems as swiftly and efficiently as possible. Of the more than 7,000 patients who pass through the clinic each year, a group of 100 or so have required this level of care.

Children's Dental Health Clinic of course, takes every precaution to ensure that the sedation procedure is safe, employing only anesthesiologists who specialize in dental pediatrics. Even so, the clinic neither takes for granted nor rushes into surgery as a first option, considering all alternatives and reserving major procedures for the most extreme cases. There are some children however — those with very



challenging disabilities or cognitive dysfunctions – who will almost always require sedation, as will many who experience severe dental phobias.

Thanks to the clinic’s IV Sedation Program, children can receive the gentle and safe dental surgery they need. A grant from The Ahmanson Foundation has enabled the organization to expand the program, making headway into a wait list of more than 100 children.

Nevertheless, the need for basic dental care continues to grow. In recent years, budget cuts and the economic downturn have left a growing number of children without access to regular care. Those who are lucky find their way to the clinic, but because demand is high, the wait for basic appointments can be long. The Children’s Dental Foundation Mobile Clinic relieves some of that demand by traveling to Title I schools in Long Beach to conduct oral assessments, education sessions and cleanings. In addition, the clinic also runs satellite operations in the city of Bellflower and on Catalina Island.

And when those satellites find serious cases, the IV Sedation Program at the Long Beach site is there to serve them. “We never know what we’re going to discover out there,” Blake said. “But thanks to this grant, we’re able to serve the toughest cases quickly and efficiently and, we hope, make a real impact in teaching low income families how to safely and effectively promote long term oral health, so that next time we see their kids, it’s for nothing more than a cleaning.”

