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Filling a need

Volunteer serves as point man for clinic's dental program

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As a volunteer dentist at the Midvale Family Health Clinic, Floyd Tarbet is unlikely to ever have to drill a cavity or take an X-ray. He has been a dentist long enough to know that many of the patients whose mouths he peers into will have serious dental problems that are beyond what the under-equipped dental office at the clinic can handle.

"Well, our dentist's chair is really a podiatrist's chair," Tarbet says, gesturing around the small room in the clinic that is adjacent to Midvale Middle School.

He also has been around the Salt Lake Valley long enough to know which dentist might do a good job fixing a problem diagnosed at the clinic. That kind of experience is one of the reasons Midvale city officials called upon the popular retired dentist to chair the city's dental-access program.

"Five years ago, when we had our first health fair, it became apparent that dental health was the No. 1 issue for our low-income people," says Midvale Mayor JoAnn Seghini. "Without Dr. Tarbet, any idea we had of serving those people would still be in the planning stages. He's really kicked it up a notch."

The clinic, operated by Intermountain Healthcare, offers health care to under-insured, low-income families or anyone in the greater Salt Lake City area who, due to language or cultural barriers, is unable to obtain medical care. It is patterned after the Salt Lake Donated Dental Clinic near Pioneer Park in downtown Salt Lake City, where Tarbet also volunteers.

Tarbet, who has lived in Midvale for 32 years, sets aside two days a month to see patients at the clinic he hopes to help build up in his hometown. So far, business at the Midvale site has been somewhat slow. "People are hesitant to go to the dentist until it becomes an emergency," says Midvale Community Development Director Mauricio Agramont. "We are hopeful that we can be an education resource as well as a referral for patients in need."

Tarbet's gentle chair-side manner is surely a selling point.

He speaks in hushed tones as he explains to patients the importance of dental hygiene and what options are available for correcting the problems he finds. He wears a surgical mask as he examines the patients.

"Oh, you're being such a big help," Tarbet says when a 4-year-old patient starts to cry.

To complete the examination, Tarbet suggests the young boy's mother hold him on her lap as if she is the patient.

It doesn't take long for the dentist to assess the damage. Tarbet says the boy suffers from "bottle mouth," tooth decay caused when young teeth are exposed to sugary liquids for extended periods of time. The malady is common among young patients who are put to bed with a bottle of juice or milk.

"If you've ever had a sensitive tooth," Tarbet explains. "this would be like having a whole mouthful of them. If it weren't for this clinic, he'd need about \$5,000 to correct this."

Tarbet makes a few calls and the family is on its way to another dentist who will assist them pro bono in getting the young man some prosthetics to wear until his adult teeth come in.

"If you spread it out, no one dentist is too burdened," he says. "No one, certainly not a dentist, likes to see people in pain."

The clinic has a stable of local dentists including Tarbet and his son, Chris, at their offices on 6000 South who donate dental services to low-income and under-insured patients. The clinic asks patients to pay \$50 to help cover the cost of pain medication for each visit. But no one is turned away if they can't afford the fee.

"One of my biggest concerns is making sure the patient show up for the appointment after the dentist has blocked out a valuable period of time to assist us," Tarbet says.

Tarbet's son says his dad is an example of the unspoken code among dentists that, contrary to popular belief, is about helping, not hurting people.

"Dentistry is really an opportunity to help people to help them get out of pain, to look better and to feel better about themselves," Chris Tarbet says.

The elder Tarbet, who left his primary practice several years ago to serve an LDS mission in New Jersey, still works one or two days a week in the office with his son. He says working at the clinic is his way of giving back to the community.

"I've enjoyed my career, and I've enjoyed living in Midvale," Tarbet says. "There is a real community spirit of compassion here and I want to be a part of it."