

Local dentists shirking responsibility to county

I am a dental hygienist who recently volunteered at the local health fair for uninsured and under-insured children (see "Health Fair addresses problems faced by uninsured kids," Sept. 9). I have practiced for over 20 years in Weber, Davis, and Box Elder counties, as well as in Baton Rouge, La. Thus, I am well aware of the extent of untreated dental disease that exists in all communities.

Dental care, along with medical care, is very expensive. It is now proven that untreated dental disease is communicable and also can spread bacteria throughout the body, causing serious medical problems. Recently in Massachusetts, a 12-year old child died when an untreated decayed and abscessed tooth became septic.

Salt Lake City has had a donated dental clinic for the homeless and low-income residents for many years. This clinic operates full time and is staffed by dentists and hygienists who volunteer their time. I currently volunteer there along with Dr. Jay DeLaMare, a retired Tooele dentist. Some of the volunteer



Karen Christiansen
GUEST COLUMNIST

dentists there even take patients to their private offices when they need treatment that is beyond what can be provided at the clinic.

Tooele now has a new county-funded dental clinic. We, the local taxpayers, are now paying a Salt Lake-area dentist to work there two days a week, and there is presently a backlog of approximately 50 people awaiting treatment at this new clinic. Yet Tooele County has over 30 dentists listed in the local phone directory, so obviously county residents are having their dental care done locally and thus supporting local dentists.

But our local dentists aren't supporting the clinic.

If all of our local dentists would volunteer a few hours a month our county dental clinic could meet the needs of

many who will otherwise go without care. All of us should ask our local dentists why they are not volunteering their services. The county clinic's hours could be flexible, offering evening and Saturday appointments, if that is the only time local dentists can afford to volunteer their time.

One way or another, all members of society pay for untreated dental disease. Homeless, uninsured and low-income patients end up being treated at hospital emergency rooms, they miss out on employment opportunities because of health complications, and their children miss school because of toothaches or even more expensive and serious related medical issues.

It is currently being stressed in national political campaigns that volunteerism is necessary to keep taxes low and government a manageable size. Tooele County's local dentists need to take that message to heart.

Karen Christiansen is a volunteer Dental Hygienist that lives in Tooele.