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Local dentists want to give kids a smile

Local dentists and healthcare agencies hope to educate children, parents and the community about the need for regular dental care at a young age.

The Southeastern Connecticut Oral Health collaborative – Smiles Across Southeast Connecticut – will celebrate National Children’s Dental Health month in February. On Feb. 3, celebrated nationally as Give Kids a Smile Day, local dentists will provide free dental care and treatment to children who are enrolled in the In School Dental Programs run by United Community & Family Services in Norwich and Community Health Center in New London.

Improving children’s dental health is a national issue. The American Dental Association recommends that children see a dentist no later than their first birthday, yet only three out of five children have seen a dentist before kindergarten. By then, 52 percent of 6- to 8-year-old children have tooth decay, according to the Healthy People 2000 oral health update.

Robert Strick, DMD, a Norwich dentist and

member of the Backus Medical Staff, as well as Mary Vallee, DDS, a Groton pediatric dentist, co-chairs of this year’s event, have been working together to recruit New London County dentists to participate in the event. Eight dentists, with offices throughout the region, have agreed to volunteer their services.

“So many children don’t get care on a regular basis, and then we see multiple areas of teeth decay, when six or more teeth are affected. This can cause low-grade pain constantly, affecting children psychologically, impacting their performance at school and at home,” said Dr. Strick, who, in addition to his private practice, is also an independent consultant for United Community & Family Services.

“Although people may think baby teeth don’t have much purpose, or will just be replaced, they are important. They hold the

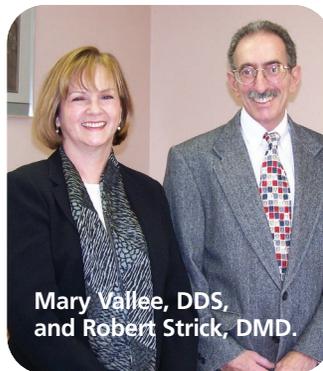
place for permanent teeth, are used for eating and are important aesthetically.”

When dentists donate their time and equipment, it can help reduce the burden on the region’s clinics, which have long waiting times for dental care. This year’s goal is to treat at least 100 children on that day, said Sue Peters, Project Director of Smiles.

“Dental disease is one of the most widely spread diseases in children, and the majority of it is so preventable,” Dr. Vallee said. “It is important to teach children about keeping their mouths clean and healthy eating habits.”

She said it is important to involve the schools to help identify children with cavities and get them treatment.

“We are working with the state and the ADA and this year we are kicking it up a notch,” Dr. Vallee said. “Hopefully next year it will cascade and even more dentists will get involved.” ■



Mary Vallee, DDS,
and Robert Strick, DMD.