

Retired dentist donates services to free clinic

By Clark Davis



October 29, 2008

There's a shortage of dentists in West Virginia, but one retiree is doing his part to help those who would otherwise not be able to receive dental care: 75-year-old Dr. Leo Fleckenstein of Huntington.

"As you can see we have activated, foot activated switches on that there, knee activated on the other ones over there..." Fleckenstein said.

That's Dr. Leo Fleckenstein giving a tour of his free dental clinic at the Ebenezer Medical Outreach center in Huntington. He retired from private practice in 2004, but that doesn't mean he stopped working.

"Someone came to me, and they heard they were wanting to open a clinic here and I was just sitting on my rear end at my house not doing much of anything, so I came over and we looked at what they had and it was just junk that somebody had donated to them," Fleckenstein said.

"There was no way you could use it and then plus I told them they need to start with the clinic over there and see if we could get the equipment from over at Cabell Huntington, the children's clinic, which we did and that's kind of what got it all started."

The clinic serves mostly the working poor. Fleckenstein says he doesn't deserve credit; he says with the help and generosity of others it just fell into place. He scoured dental facilities across the nation for equipment.

"Things just fell into place, how often are you going to get someone that's going to donate all this equipment I showed you," Fleckenstein said.

"It was shipped from New Berg, Oregon at their expense and installed at their expense. Technicians came down from Pittsburg and installed it for us. We built this on a shoestring believe me and it was just fortunate, we were lucky."

Fleckenstein does all this even though he suffers from transverse myelitis which is a condition that causes him to walk with two canes.

"In 2001, my practice was sold or being sold at the time and after walking five miles on the beach and taking a shower and getting ready to go to dinner all the sudden I started getting numb in my chest or below my navel," Fleckenstein said. "Everything felt fine up above there and to make a long story short I ended up with transverse myelitis."

The condition leaves him somewhat numb from the waist down, so he works part time. The facility depends on dentists who volunteer at the clinic and to accept patients who can't be accommodated at the facility.

"The endodontists have been fabulous about taken care, we don't even have to do root canals here, we get them comfortable, but then they will see them in the same week or next week. We really have great support from the specialists here," Fleckenstein said.

Fleckenstein says it gives him the opportunity to remain involved and help those in need.

"A lot of people are in dentistry just to make a living, I enjoyed what I did. And I enjoyed working with the patients and I kind of missed it. A lot of guys say they don't really miss dentistry; they just miss the patients and what they have. Well I'm kind of, I'm kind of both," Fleckenstein said.

But Fleckenstein says they need more help, the dental clinic has a waiting list of about 400 patients.