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## Easing W.Va.'s Ache for Care

Volunteer Dentists Treat More Than 1,100 in Two-Day Event

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HEDGESVILLE, W.Va., June 28 -- Some came with cracked teeth. Others described theirs as rotten. One man chipped his while eating ice. Another -- improbably -- while eating a cheeseburger.

"I thought there was a piece of bread caught in my teeth," said Jeff Coonrod, 37, of Charles Town, W.Va. "So I tried to get it out, and there was nothing there."

Most hadn't been to the dentist in at least five years. All cited the same reasons: too expensive, no dental insurance, ignored it until it hurt.

Through a free dental clinic organized by the [United Way](#) and the Virginia Dental Association, all they needed to get care in this small town 90 miles northwest of the District was a little patience.

More than 300 were in line when [Berkeley County's](#) Hedgesville High School opened at 6 a.m. Saturday for the second and final day of the Mission of Mercy. Some had waited since midnight. Others had had teeth pulled or repaired the day before and had come back for more work. More than 1,100 people were treated during the two days, said Terry Dickinson, executive director of the Virginia Dental Association. An army of 700 volunteers from Berkeley and the surrounding counties transformed the high school into a MASH-like dental facility.

Nurses took vital signs by hallway lockers. Dentistry students in the school's trophy-adorned foyer poked about in patients' mouths and sent them off for X-rays, repair work or dreaded extractions.

Such was the lot of 29-year-old Mike Waugh of nearby Berkeley Springs, W.Va. Sitting under a basketball hoop on the edge of the gym floor, crowded with 50 volunteer dentists, their assistants and tools, he talked about the four teeth he thought he was about to lose.

"On a pain scale from one to 10, the past couple of nights have been a 10," he said. In the past, he'd broken his leg, his hand and his finger, but none, he said, hurt as much as his teeth.

"It's unbearable," he said. "Your leg, you can prop it up. You can't prop your mouth up."

Waugh's work as a self-employed floorer supports his wife and four children, he said, but doesn't bring in enough for health insurance, much less dental care. His wife earns \$8 an hour in day care. She, too, gets no benefits.

A volunteer escorted him to a chair. The dentist looked at his folder and said he'd pull four teeth. Waugh leaned back and opened wide. The dentist reached for the forceps.

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Dickinson said he organized the first Mission of Mercy in July 2000 after leaving his private practice in search of "something more." He has since helped organize 37 clinics, mostly in Virginia, but also in Texas, Kansas, Iowa and other states. The Hedgesville clinic, his first in the state, was funded by a \$36,000 grant from a local philanthropist.

Dickinson estimates that the mass clinics can serve each patient for \$15. This is substantially less than the \$450 to \$500 he said is the average for dental visits. He estimates that the 1,100 people going through the clinic in two days will have gotten more than \$500,000 worth of care.

Why would so many wake up before dawn for dental care?

"There are a lot of low-income people, and dentistry is expensive," said Richard Meckstroth, a professor of dentistry at the University of West Virginia who was volunteering yesterday.

Another reason is that the number of local dentists has failed to keep pace with rapid population growth.

"So the dentists are swamped with people who can pay, and those who can't are stuck," Meckstroth said.

The problem is compounded by the lack of support for young dentists opening practices, he said. Establishing a new, fully equipped office can cost more than \$100,000, a sum beyond the reach of most recent dentistry grads.

The mass clinics provide a valuable service, he said, but he hopes for more systematic care.

"This isn't the way to do this," he said. "This is only 1,000 people, and there's lots more who need this kind of care."

After an hour in the chair, the efforts of two dentists and an assistant had left Waugh's mouth two teeth poorer. The third tooth finally yielded to the pliers, and Waugh drew an open hand across his throat to show that he'd had enough. The fourth tooth he was worried about was not one he had to lose.

The dentist gave Waugh some pointers on helping his mouth heal, handed him his folder and wrote a prescription for [Tylenol](#) with codeine. The anesthetic would wear off in a few hours, he said.

Near the exit, a volunteer gave Waugh some gauze for his gums and toothbrushes for him and his children. He wrote a thank-you note in a book for the clinic's funder, put an ice pack to his cheek and said he had to get home for his son's 7th birthday party.

"But I'm afraid I won't eat no birthday cake today," he said.

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