

Press Release

This Week Let's Not Forget About Our Teeth & Gums

October 16th to 22nd is Community Health and Wellbeing Week, a province-wide initiative to raise awareness about building healthier, more vibrant communities for everyone living in Ontario. The theme this year is: **Health Equity at the Centre**.

Health inequities mean some populations have higher rates of disease and die earlier than others, because of barriers accessing the health system and other social services. Seaway Valley Community Health Centre (SVCHC) wants to raise awareness of the importance of oral health as a health equity issue in our community.

There is a link between poor oral health and [the severity of chronic conditions](#) such as diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Oral diseases and missing teeth can also affect a person's sense of self-worth and their ability to gain employment.

In Canada, approximately [one in six](#) people have difficulty accessing oral health care because they cannot afford the cost, do not have dental insurance or it is too expensive to travel to the nearest provider. In our community, it is the most vulnerable people who do not have access to dental care including low wage workers and their children, seniors and the institutionalized elderly, Indigenous people and new Canadians. These are the groups who have the highest rates of tooth decay, dental pain and gum disease.

The Eastern Ontario Health Unit in partnership with SVCHC offers a dental clinic free of charge for children 17 and under who meet financial requirements. Although there is some coverage for people receiving social assistance, there are no provincial dental health programs for low income adults and seniors.

So what are people doing when they have dental pain but cannot afford to see a dentist? Many people turn to their family doctors in the hope they can get help. In desperation, some try to treat the pain themselves or go to black market dentists who are not qualified to provide dental care. In our area, we know that many people access the emergency room to treat dental issues.

In 2015, there were 863 visits for teeth and mouth related issues at the Cornwall Community Hospital emergency room and approximately ¼ of these visits were from repeat users, (Data Source: IntelliHEALTH ONTARIO Ministry of Health and Long Term Care). The average cost for a visit to the emergency room to see a physician about a dental emergency is \$513. This does not include the cost for those people who require hospitalization as a result of this visit.

Need to expand public dental programs for people living on low incomes

The Ministry of Health & Long Term Care is working to transform Ontario's healthcare system to ensure people can get the right care, at the right time, in the right place. They have committed to a sustainable

system that delivers better value for public investment. Yet lack of access to affordable oral health care is costing taxpayers at minimum \$38 million per year -- without offering effective treatment for people's dental problems.

We need government investment in public dental programs that provide preventative care and treatment for low income adults and seniors.

SVCHC has two fully equipped dental suites which, if resourced sufficiently, would be an appropriate place to offer much needed oral health services. Research shows that people living on low income prefer to be treated in public dental clinics where they feel welcome and valued, and that many private dentists are frustrated because low income people cannot pay and often miss appointments.

With an upcoming election, we want to ensure that all parties are aware of our local oral health need and that this issue becomes part of their election platform. We need to ensure all parties have plans to reform the healthcare system to include oral health so that the vulnerable people in our community have equitable access to the dental care they need.

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