

Medical volunteers treat hundreds in need

HEALTH: Los Médicos Voladores, a group that usually works in developing countries, visits Thermal.

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By DAVID OLSON / The Press-Enterprise

THERMAL - The patients were so desperate for basic health and dental care that they began lining up before dawn Saturday for the one-day clinic in a rural desert school. A doctor, two dentists and other volunteers were so dedicated that they drove up to 10 hours from their Northern California homes to treat as many as possible.

The organization the volunteers belong to, Los Médicos Voladores, or Flying Doctors, usually sends doctors, dentists and nurses to help poor people in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and other developing countries.

For the past 10 years, they have also been coming twice a year to Thermal, a farming community near the Salton Sea dotted with trailers housing people who let their teeth rot or leave their diabetes unchecked because they can't afford care.

Two dozen Flying Doctors volunteers were expected Saturday, but only half came. Bad weather in Northern California on Friday forced cancellation of the single-engine flights. Those who could do so drove through the rain instead.

"I just couldn't imagine leaving them high and dry," said Dr. Audrey D'Andrea, of Oakland. "These people are hurting."

Patients Come Early

When the gates to Toro Canyon Middle School opened at 8 a.m., more than 200 people were already waiting. Hundreds more arrived later. Dozens of prospective patients had to be turned away.

Volunteers -- including an optometrist, a dentist and dental students -- from Riverside, Calimesa, Hemet and other Inland cities worked alongside the Flying Doctors members.

Diego Velasco, 30, arrived at 4:30 a.m. He said he knew that in an area where few have health or dental insurance, people would start lining up early.

The Thermal resident said in Spanish that when he noticed a few months ago that two of his teeth were decaying, he asked a private dental office how much it would cost to fill two cavities. \$1,800, he was told.

"Someone like me can't pay that," said Velasco, who earns \$6.75 an hour tending date-palm trees. "I'd have to save up money for years."

Then he heard on Spanish-language radio about the visit of Los Médicos Voladores.

Bacteria had eaten away so much of two of his teeth that they may have fallen out within a few months if the cavities had not been filled, said Lori Watkins, the UCLA dental student who treated him.



Ed Crisostomo / The Press-Enterprise

Denise Rodriguez, 9, holds her 6-year-old sister Maria's hand as Gerard Sabate, a Loma Linda University dentistry student, extracts her tooth at the Flying Doctors clinic in Thermal.

Velasco still has six more cavities, Watkins said. But with a room full of people waiting, she did not have time to fill them.

"Tell him to make sure to go to the dentist for the other ones," Dr. Larry Tabor told her.

Velasco said that is almost useless advice for him, because he cannot afford to.

"I'll just have to suffer," he said.

Tabor's dental office in Castro Valley is in a middle-class Bay Area suburb where he rarely observes the severe dental problems he treated Saturday.

"What we see in Thermal is what we see in our trips to Mexico," he said. "We treat people without teeth -- people with multiple abscesses. The cavity rate is about five times what we see in our practices."

People tend to postpone care for financial reasons, so when they do seek help, problems are advanced, he said.

Basic Care Missing for Many

Most people who arrived at the Flying Doctors clinics sought dental or eye care, because even non-profit and public clinics typically do not provide those services, said Rosa Lucas, a nurse practitioner at non-profit clinics in Thermal and nearby Oasis who was helping administer glucose and blood-pressure tests. Adults without minor children and undocumented immigrants are among those who do not qualify for MediCal, the state-federal program that serves the poor.

Some maladies D'Andrea sees in her visits reflect the demographics of the eastern edge of the Coachella Valley, where the residents are overwhelmingly poor and Latino. Back problems are common, she said, because the agricultural workers, housekeepers and gardeners who are often patients perform hard physical labor. She also sees many people with diabetes and hypertension, which disproportionately strike Latinos.

D'Andrea does what she can during these twice-yearly visits. But she knows many patients will never have adequate long-term care.

"The current health-care system is a mess," D'Andrea said. "I think it's an embarrassment to the United States government!"

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