



Media Release

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Public health upgrading dental clinics

Oral health programs have continued despite challenges presented by pandemic

The Grey Bruce Health Unit's oral health programs, which include in-school screenings and free dental services for eligible low-income children and seniors, have continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Many health units in Ontario suspended their oral health programs during the pandemic, so we are one of the few areas in the province that has continued offering these much-needed services to eligible clients," says Jason Wepler, the program manager who oversees the oral health portfolio.

Medical officer of health Dr. Ian Arra adds, "It wasn't an easy decision to commit to providing oral health services to the most vulnerable while our GBHU team was responding to the emergency. However, we had the utmost confidence we could deliver thanks to the unwavering commitment of our staff and managers to serve the community and by utilizing evidence-based emergency management and best management practices."

Public health is also undertaking a \$320,000 project to upgrade its dental clinic at the health unit headquarters in Owen Sound and has completed a \$336,000 renovation to its clinic at the South East Grey Community Health Centre in Markdale.

Contractors began renovating the Owen Sound clinic Jan. 10. The work includes constructing a third operatory, installing a panoramic dental X-ray machine and new dental cabinetry and creating an upgraded reprocessing room.

Wepler anticipates the work will be completed by the end of February.

Upgrades to the Markdale clinic wrapped up in mid-December. They include an improved reprocessing room and added charting room and storage as well as new dental cabinetry and a new dental chair.

Funding for the upgrades was provided by the Ministry of Health.

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Public health has also re-applied for funding to add a fixed dental clinic and operatory in Bruce County, which is currently serviced only by mobile clinics. The application was submitted in early January.

The Grey Bruce Health Unit oversees four mandated oral health programs.

An assessment and surveillance program involves dental hygienists screening children at all Bluewater District School Board, Bruce Grey Catholic District School Board, private and Mennonite/Amish schools in Grey-Bruce as well as École catholique Saint-Dominique-Savio in Owen Sound.

About 6,720 students were screened in 2019/20 and that number dropped to 1,441 students in 2020/21 due to pandemic-related school closures. So far this school year, 3,456 students have been screened.

Students in schools considered low-risk are screened in junior kindergarten, senior kindergarten and Grade 2, while students in medium-risk schools are also screened in Grade 4 and students in high-risk schools are also screened in Grade 7.

“We’re on target to have all eligible students screened this year,” Weppler said.

The health unit also runs a Healthy Smiles Ontario program, which provides free preventative, restorative and emergency dental services for eligible children and youth aged 17 and under, as well as the OSDCP, which provides those same services as well as dentures for eligible seniors aged 65 and up.

Nearly 7,000 clients were seen at public health dental clinics in Owen Sound, Markdale, Walkerton and Wiarton in 2019, while 2,173 were seen in 2020 and 2,015 in 2021.

The clinics are used primarily by seniors. The majority of children enrolled in Healthy Smiles Ontario are referred to outside dental providers.

Public health also oversees the Children’s Oral Health Initiative, a Health Canada program aimed at increasing access to preventative oral health services for Inuit and First Nations children up to seven years of age.

The program has been placed on hold during the pandemic, as per a mutual agreement between public health and Indigenous partners. It’s expected to relaunch this winter.

Attachment: Photo of the new dental chair at the Grey Bruce Health Unit’s dental clinic in Markdale.

For More Information:

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