

David Lees

Dedicated to St. Ignace

Dentist David Lees likes to say that his practice has 140,000 children. That's the number of kids in Santa Clara County who don't have access to the dental care that they need. Lees runs the Children's Dental Initiative (CDI), a program established in 2001 on behalf of these youngsters by a San Jose-based, nonprofit organization called The Health Trust.

The CDI's beneficiaries couldn't have a better champion than Lees. With a flash of boyish red hair tempered by a receding hairline, the 47-year-old has the credentials of three people and the zeal of a whole congregation.

"I have a real passion for combining my chosen profession and spiritual upbringing to get dental care to underserved children," says Lees, who in addition to being a dentist, also has advanced degrees in law and business.

Lees' mission is to keep the main parts of the CDI up and running. On a million dollar budget for the coming fiscal year, Lees oversees a children's dental clinic in downtown San Jose, as well as a mobile clinic that travels among county schools.

From the same fiscal pot, Lees also leads a grass-roots contingent of movers and shakers from the county's oral health scene, who work together to close gaps in service and to coordinate the dental care of the county's needy young people.

The CDI also encourages volunteerism by sponsoring an event called Dentistry with Heart each February. During this event, many county dentists open their offices and provide free services to kids who might not otherwise get care.

The Silent Epidemic

One of CDI's goals is to raise public awareness about the state of dental health in the county's youth. Nationwide, tooth decay is a large

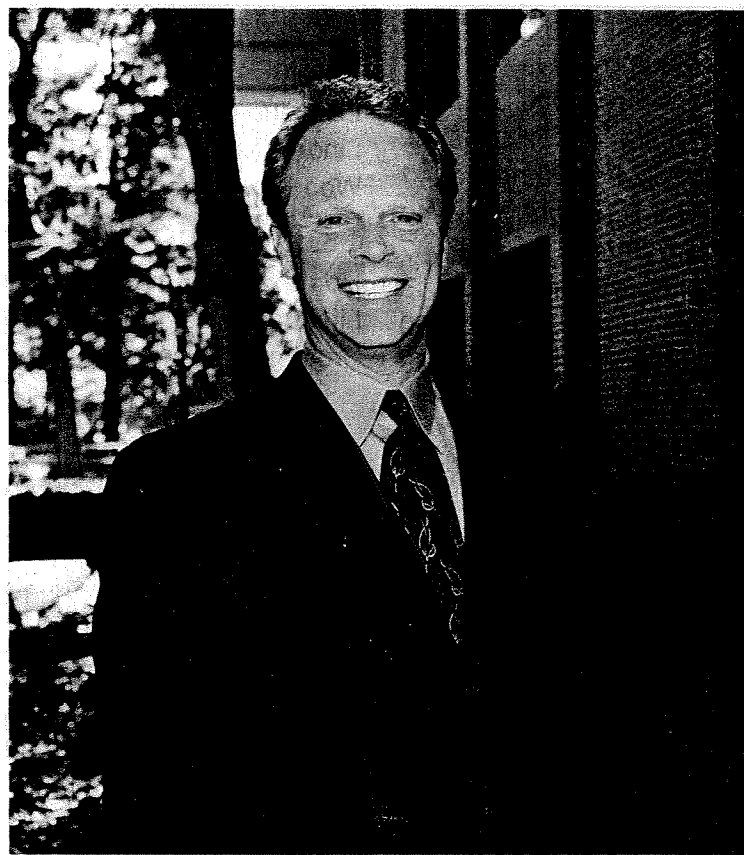
and well-documented problem. It's the most common chronic childhood disease, five times more prevalent than asthma and seven times more prevalent than hay fever. In 2000, then-Surgeon General David Satcher dubbed dental disease in children "the silent epidemic," noting that 25 percent of poor American children have never seen a dentist by the time they reach kindergarten.

Shortly after the surgeon general's office released its report, The Health Trust did its own needs assessment, the purpose being "to evaluate the oral health of children in Santa Clara County, formulate policy recommendations and develop a strategy to address the overwhelming need," according to literature from The Health Trust.

Among the study's dramatic findings: More than 30 percent of children in Santa Clara County enter kindergarten with untreated tooth decay and a third of the county's elementary school students have untreated cavities. Socioeconomic status weighs heavily in determining which children are most susceptible.

Bad teeth are more than just a cosmetic problem. Throughout the United States, 51 million school hours are lost each year because of dental problems. "(In Santa Clara County), one in every four Hispanic elementary kids sits in a classroom with an urgent need for dental care," Lees says. This means that the child often has pain or swelling. The ensuing distractive behavior caused by this pain affects not only the child, but also all of the children that are sitting around him or her, Lees notes.

Because of this ripple effect, Lees believes that dental health should be a community issue, not just a parental responsibility. If he has his way, dental screening — like mandatory hearing and vision tests — will soon be required for all children entering kindergarten.



Dentist David Lees is on a crusade against tooth decay, the most common chronic childhood disease. PHOTO BY SUSAN J. WEIAND

Calling All Dentists

To do that, however, requires dramatically increasing the number of dental facilities and personnel that serve underprivileged children. According to Lees, even if all of the dental resources available to the county's poor operated at 100 percent capacity, no more than 20,000 of the 140,000 underserved kids would receive care.

In response to this shortfall, Lees shifts from dentist to persuasive business person, rallying all of the players in his vast network of dental professionals. The group is called the Silicon Valley Oral Health Collaborative and includes more than a dozen agencies that represent service providers, granting organizations and patient groups such as Santa Clara County's Maternal and Child Health Program and the school districts.

The collaborative's most recent achievement is the First Five Early Learning Initiatives, which are directed at kids in the San Jose Unified and Gilroy school districts. "It includes everything from building awareness in the public all the way through the continuum of care to

sedation dentistry," Lees says.

Over the next four years, a number of prevention-based programs will be introduced, including saliva testing for moms, which can help dentists predict which children are most at risk for tooth decay.

And down the road? "I just always follow my heart and try to do the right thing," Lees says. "To really get an accurate reflection of the impact we're having on the community, you really need to look into the eyes of these children and to hear some of the stories of the children and families that we've touched. It makes me look forward to coming into work every day."

Cynthia Marshall Schuman flosses daily at her home in Mountain View. She can be reached at cmschuman@attbi.com.

Resources

For information about free dental screenings for children in your area, visit The Health Trust's Web site (www.healthtrust.org).