San Francisco practice makes house calls

In a society where expert medical care seems ever more elusive and impersonal, the last thing you might expect is a dental practice that makes house calls. However, Bay Area House Call Dentists (BAHCD), based in San Francisco, has built a thriving practice around visiting their patients where they live.

Rather than serve the well to do, BAHCD specializes in helping some of the Bay Area’s least-served populations: the elderly, the housebound and the infirm. BAHCD is a service of the Blende Dental Group, headed by Dr. David Blende, a practitioner with more than 20 years of experience providing comprehensive dental care and a leader in the field of dental surgery.

“We serve not only people with disabilities, which is what people think of when they think of special needs, but also people with severe phobias and complex medical conditions,” explained Dr. Cheryl Elacio, director of house call services and geriatric services for BAHCD. “Basically anyone who is not a good candidate for a traditional dental office for either physical, emotional or cognitive reasons.”

BAHCD patients may include a child with autism, a senior with Alzheimer’s disease, an obese or otherwise immobility individual or someone who’s simply too scared to set foot in a dentist’s office. These are people who regularly go without dental care because their caretakers are unable to get them to a dentist, and because dental problems, unless accompanied by acute pain, often go diagnosed.

During their house calls, BAHCD practitioners take X-rays, perform cleanings, identify gum disease, prescribe medicines, remove infected teeth, identify and sometimes fix poorly fitting dentures and determine effective courses for longer term comprehensive treatment where needed.

Because of the flexible design of the Bay Area House Call Dentists visit the elderly, housebound and the infirm in their San Francisco homes (Photo/Photoquest, Dreamstime.com).
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The equipment used, patients can be examined in their own favorite chair or even lying in bed. Not only can such treatment bring immediate relief, but it also can save the patient and his or her caretaker many subsequent, arduous trips out of the house.

If a patient needs a lot of work requiring several specialists, he might have to visit one office after another — an endodontist’s office for a root canal, a periodontist’s office for gum surgery, a dentist to deal with decay,” says Blende. “But when we do a house call, we’re going to gather all the information we need to make a diagnosis and bring in members of our specialist team. So we’ve saved them, maybe, three or four appointments. If they need more treatment that cannot be done in the home, the BAHCD team handles the arrangements for the follow-up work at the BAHCD office or in a local practice, helping to get the patient to and from treatment, completing the work itself and having a specialist on hand to keep the patient calm, comfortable and safe.

Elacio and her BAHCD colleague, Dr. Samer Itani, perform many of the house calls. Once a patient is found to need hospital or in-office work, Blende frequently takes the helm in planning and providing this care. Blende is an expert in using general anesthesia during dental procedures, which is especially important for children and phobic patients. Allowing a confused or frightened patient to sleep through dental surgery considerably reduces stress for all concerned.

When their patients do need hospital attention, Blende, who is chief of the Division of Dentistry at Kaiser Permanente San Francisco and chief of the Dental Division at California Pacific Medical Center, and Itani, vice chief of the Division of Dentistry at Kaiser Permanente San Francisco, are well positioned to make that happen quickly and smoothly. Increasingly over the past two years, the BAHCD team has been a staff of experienced and compassionate assistants, visit senior communities, where they may see up to 20 patients in an afternoon. The problem of undiagnosed dental issues is particularly acute in such communities, according to Itani. And those issues, he says, are much more dangerous to a patient’s overall health than many people realize.

“We recently went to a community where we saw 19 seniors,” Itani says. “Several had been there for over a year, yet their caregivers weren’t even aware they had partial dentures. So, clearly, those dentures weren’t getting cleaned properly. That’s when infection starts to set in, not to mention the obvious issue of discomfort. We might find broken teeth or gum disease, lesions that can be a sign of oral cancer, and gum disease, which is quite dangerous because it breeds bacteria which gets into the bloodstream, contributing to pneumonia, heart attacks and stroke.”

“All these things have to be treated, but they often aren’t,” Itani says. “It’s a crucial issue for the elderly, not just for their daily comfort but for their overall health.”

In fact, Bay Area House Call Dentist teams frequently receive referrals from other dentists who are in despair over getting their elderly or infirm patients in for office visits, who turn to the BAHCD’s in-house treatment capabilities as the best answer.

“House calls are not easy, but we firmly believe that everybody can have, and everybody deserves, the best possible care,” Itani says. A success story

Minerva Dutra of Petaluma, Calif., is more than convinced of the value of in-home dental care. Dutra’s 76-year-old mother, Delores Dawson, has Alzheimer’s disease, uses a wheelchair and lives in a residential care home. Dawson recently received at-home care from BAHCD followed by surgery performed by Blende.

“My mother has specific needs, and other dentists weren’t able to accommodate her,” Dutra says. “I was very happy to have a dentist come to us instead of my having to drive my mom all around the doctor who came to our home, Elacio, and her assistant were sweet, caring and extremely skillful. When it was time for the surgery, Blende was fantastic, always letting me know what was going on and taking extra steps to be sure my mom was comfortable. I had all the confidence in the world in him. Now my mom feels much better. It’s a great relief.”

(Source: PRWEB)

A study indicates that weight control and physical fitness may help reduce the risk of severe gum disease. (Photo/Paul Moore, Dreamstime.com)

issue of the Journal of Periodontology, researchers found that patients who maintained a healthy weight and had high levels of physical fitness had a lower incidence of severe periodontitis. Using a body mass index (BMI) and percent body fat as a measure of weight control, and maximal oxygen consumption (VO2max) as a measure of physical fitness, researchers compared subjects’ weight and fitness variables with the results of a periodontal examination. Those with the lowest BMI and highest levels of fitness had significantly lower rates of severe periodontitis.

Periodontitis, or gum disease, is a chronic inflammatory disease that affects the supporting bone and tissues around the teeth. Gum disease is a major cause of tooth loss in adults, and researchers have suggested gum disease is associated with other diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, and rheumatoid arthritis.

Samuel Low, DDS, MS, associate dean and professor of periodontology at the University of Florida College of Dentistry, and president of the American Academy of Periodontology (AAP), says that research concerning overall health and periodontal health should motivate people to maintain a healthy weight and get enough physical fitness.

“Research continues to demonstrate that our overall health and oral health are connected,” says Dr. Low. “Weight management and physical fitness both contribute to overall health; and now we believe staying in shape may help lower your risk of developing gum disease. Since gum disease is related to other diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. There is even more reason to take care of yourself through diet and exercise.”

Low also encourages comprehensive periodontal care through daily tooth brushing and flossing, and routine visits to a dental professional, such as a periodontist, a specialist in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of gum disease.

(Source: American Academy of Periodontology)