

Dentists struggle in weak economy

By CAROL HOPKINS
Of The Oakland Press

It's a tough time to be a dentist.

This year, Chrysler and possibly GM retirees will lose dental benefits.

With the economy tanking, people have less cash to pay for dental and medical procedures, and now the Legislature is talking about cutting Medicaid funds for low-income adults who need dental care.

University of Michigan Dental School professor Bill Piskorowski, who meets regularly with dentists through his job, said he sees how Michigan's economic upheaval is affecting his profession.

"Some offices have had a 10 to 30 percent decrease in revenue," said Piskorowski, who also is director of outreach and community with U-M's School of Dentistry and a former dentist.

"Support people have been laid off and (when they look for work), they have difficulty finding jobs."

Piskorowski said his wife, an experienced hygienist, applied for a job in Rochester and learned she was up against 75 other applicants.

"That's just unheard of," he said.

The Michigan Dental Association estimates there are 1,051 licensed dentists in Oakland County and 6,200 in the state, said Tom Kochheiser, association spokesman.

Kochheiser said Michigan "is becoming very challenging."

"It depends on where the practice is located and the patient base," he said. "Professionals are finding themselves competing with discretionary income."

Justin Geller, a Novi dentist who operates JMG Dentistry, said many patients he sees are now delaying treatment more than in the past and are opting for less expensive treatment options.

Geller offered a free smile makeover — which could run from restorative measures to cosmetic enhancements — this spring because of the negative news in the media.

"People are losing their jobs, homes and insurances so I decided to try to bring something positive back into the community," Geller said.

The response to the make-

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over project, which ends June 1, was overwhelming.

"The majority of applicants are jobless, and their self esteem has diminished over the years," Geller said. "There are a lot of sad stories that we are receiving, and I didn't realize how hard it is going to be to choose our finalist."

Dentists not afraid to promote

To bring in business, many dentists send out mailers advertising their services and feature price cuts to new patients.

Jeffrey Faycurry of Auburn Hills has a \$39 deal for new patients that provides a complete exam, X-rays, consultation and professional cleaning — unless certain dental conditions exist, the mailer reads.

Faycurry, a dentist for 20 years, said he has had cards mailed for a couple years.

"Anyone who doesn't market themselves will be left behind," he said.

"You have to get (patients) into the office" but, he added, "the biggest way we get new patients is from referrals."

Faycurry has seen cutbacks by patients.

"We used to be booked four to five months in advance and now it's two to three months," he said.

Office staff members did note they have seen a recent flurry with auto workers hurrying to make appointments before coverage ends in July.

Faycurry stated another change has been among senior citizens who had been using home equity loans to pay for more expensive procedures but, he said, "we've seen that drop."

Bruce Hagelthorn, a Bingham Farms dentist practicing 27 years, offers \$100 off a bill for new patients.

"It's relatively new," he said. "We've seen the need to attract new patients. And I'm interested in letting people know

I'm here."

The mailer has helped, Hagelthorn said.

"The biggest (reason for

calls) is more people asking about teeth whitening," he said.

"People want to look good and (white teeth) makes them look healthier."

James Delaney, a Waterford Township

dentist practicing 13 years, has staff hygienists visit pre-schools to discuss dentistry.

"What we do is fun-filled so it's not so scary," he said.

Families are given a \$50 off coupon to use for an exam, he said.

Delaney, who specializes in pediatric dentistry, said he believes his practice won't be hit as hard as some.

"I'm fortunate to work with kids," he said, adding that adults may postpone their trip to a dentist but still make sure their children get regular checkups.

Financing is out there

Dentists informally surveyed for this story said they were willing to work with patients on payments.

Shelly Wiles, administrator for Richard Baker, a Waterford Township dentist, said their office has always offered financing to patients.

"A lot of people don't have insurance," she said. "We can find ways to make (costs) affordable."

CareCredit is one option often offered by many dentists. The company pays the dental bill for approved patients and patients then pay the company as they would pay off a credit card bill.

Some said they would stretch a payment up to three months.

Many are accommodating in other ways, helping patients relax and offering distractions:

Faycurry said his chairs provide massage. Many dentists have TVs so patients can watch during procedures.

Faycurry hopes to expand and add a spa to his practice.

"We're getting busier," he said.

Most dentists offer early morning and evening hours now.

Delaney said he works every other Saturday.

"It's not as easy for people to get time off," he said.

"That job means everything, and time

is a precious commodity."

U-M's Piskorowski said dentists with good management skills are surviving.

Dentists heading elsewhere

One trend Piskorowski isn't happy about involves dental school graduates. Michigan has two dental schools — U-M and University of Detroit Mercy.

"A fair amount of students are looking to states where the climate is more predictable," he said, estimating that 50 to 60 percent may be heading out of Michigan.

He worries dental care is not given the priority by companies and governments.

The dental association is concerned that Gov. Jennifer Granholm proposed cutting \$2.9 million from the adult dental Medicaid program in May as part of \$304 million in cuts to the 2009 budget. The cuts begin July 1 and continue through the fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30.

The state's dental association is urging dentists who are treating Medicaid patients to submit their billings by June 30 and to contact their legislator.

"I'm hoping the state realizes they can't stop this funding," Piskorowski said. "It can come back to haunt us."

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Dr. Jeffrey Faycurry (far left) works on patient Ken Schaeffler, and is helped by dental assistant Christina Lacey on in Auburn Hills.

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