

Dental hygienists share expertise

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AHS pilot project aims to improve oral health of long-term care residents

Haley Brietzke, a licensed practical nurse at Bethany Airdrie, keeps an eye on resident Loril Bohne's oral health. Brietzke received training from an AHS dental hygienist as part of an oral health pilot program.

Loril Bohne can once again sink his teeth into solid, even chewy, foods.

And his daughter, Cindy Hein, couldn't be happier.

Bohne, 92, is one of several seniors who have benefited from an Alberta Health Services (AHS) pilot project in the Calgary area designed to help staff at local continuing care centres to spot and arrange treatment for residents' dental problems.

"It's helped him, for sure," Hein says of her dad's new dentures.

"He's able to enjoy food again. His quality of life has improved dramatically."

Two AHS registered dental hygienists have trained registered nurses, licensed practical nurses and nursing aides at two facilities how to identify oral health problems in their residents, many of whom are unable to tell health providers or loved ones that they have dental pain.

The pilot project is run through the Community Oral Health Program.

"Oral health is a key component of overall health," said Dr. Luke Shwart, dental public health officer for AHS.

"Current research shows oral disease can affect heart and lungs, and play havoc with diabetic control of blood sugars. Older individuals with poor oral health are at risk of pneumonia, malnutrition and weight loss."

The Bethany Care Society location in Airdrie became the first pilot site in 2007.



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The project was successful and rolled out to Bethany Calgary earlier this year.

Nurses and nursing aides at both facilities monitor residents for oral health problems common among the elderly: cavities; loose, sharp or broken teeth; bleeding, inflamed gums; oral abscesses and infections; and poorly fitted dentures.

Facility staff have also adopted a referral process that helps residents access dental services best suited to their physical and cognitive limitations. Options include on-site visits by dental hygienists, as well as appointments with the Foothills Medical Centre's dental clinic.

“By sharing the expertise of our AHS dental hygienists, we can reduce the number of continuing care residents with undiagnosed oral health problems,” says Del Pollard, adult/seniors team lead for the Community Oral Health Program.

That's exactly what's happening at Bethany Airdrie, according to Karin Van Goudoever, the facility's care service manager.

“The number of residents who are on a normal diet keeps going up, and the number of residents who require a minced or pureed diet keeps going down,” she says.

Today, 53 of its 74 residents are on a normal diet, up from 47 in December 2008.

“This project is helping us ensure better overall health for the residents,” says Barb Hunter, a health care aide with Bethany Airdrie.

“It improves their quality of life, too. When you can eat a regular diet instead of a minced or pureed meal, you can enjoy food more.”

Using their training, Hunter and her colleague, licensed practical nurse Haley Brietzke, determined Bohne required a new set of dentures. Now the resident is eating a normal diet and enjoying treats such as licorice and cookies.

Pollard aims to share the training and referral process with all local continuing care centres within the next five years.