

Lee County dentist makes house calls to seniors unable to visit office

BY FRANK GLUCK • fgluck@news-press.com • February 23, 2010

1:10 A.M. — Dr. Kristin Outlan was finishing up routine denture work and teeth cleaning for 92-year-old Regina Smith when something amazing happened.

Smith, who is in the latter stages of Alzheimer's disease and rarely speaks, said clearly and distinctly to Outlan: "Thank you."

It was a gratifying moment for Outlan, who recently started treating Smith in the Bonita Springs home Smith shares with her daughter and son-in-law. Yes, Outlan makes house calls.

Hers is something of a unique service in Lee County and one that may see higher demand in the coming years as more seniors opt to live at home longer rather than move into nursing homes. It is a trend known as "aging in place."

"Since 2000, local nursing homes have provided a large part of my patient base," Outlan said. "Now, as the aging-in-place concept is gaining wider acceptance, I'm expanding dental services to private homes for those unable to go out to a traditional office."

Almost 20 percent of Florida residents are older than 65. About 5 percent of them are home bound or live in nursing homes.

While demand for standard dental house calls is not huge overall, it is for many of the state's elderly, said Dr. Charles Hoffman, president of the Florida Dental Association.

"Elderly persons who are institutionalized or home bound have a difficult time getting dental care," he said.

Smith had been seeing Outlan while she was living in Juniper Village at Naples, a long-term care facility. Family members said they thought she would be more comfortable at home.

House calls are far preferable to taking the ailing woman to a dentist's office, they said. "It's just a godsend for us," said Smith's daughter, Maryann Krass. "More people should do these services. It's really needed."

Studies have long linked good oral health to good overall health. But many seniors may be avoiding the dentist's office.

A 2005 survey conducted by the University of Buffalo School of Dental Medicine found that more than half of the seniors who responded were not regularly seeing dentist.

The most cited reasons: lack of adequate transportation, anxiety and cost. Medicare does not cover most dental procedures.

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"A lot of the people would get bused in," she said. "Sometimes they'd have to wait for several hours in the waiting room before they were picked up again."

Outlan is equipped to do standard dental treatment and some minor oral surgery. More serious procedures must still be done at a hospital.

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While most of her business is at area nursing homes, Outlan hopes to expand her practice, ElderCare Oral Health, more to private homes.

Outlan is believed to be the only dentist in Lee with a purely mobile practice, according to the Lee County Dental Society.

Hers is a fee-for-service practice. She is considered an out-of-network provider when it comes to insurance. She declined to reveal her fees, saying they depend on the extent of treatment for each unique patients.

Outlan estimates she has about 1,500 patients.

Fees depend on the type of procedure and extent of care, she said.

Beyond need, Outlan said she prefers the flexibility a mobile practice offers. She also likes the relationships it has helped her build with patients and their families.

"It's a more one-on-one atmosphere," she said.

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