

Something to smile about

The Berks Community Health Center to begin offering dental care for everyone, regardless of their ability to pay.

*BY MATTHEW NOJIRI
READING EAGLE*



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The Berks Community Health Center's dental suites will be opening at its supersized location in the Rockland Plaza in Reading. Dr. Malini Moni is dental director for the health center.

If you go

WHAT: The Berks Community Health Center open house at its newest facility.

WHERE: Berks Community Health Center at Rockland, 1100A Rockland St.

WHEN: Dec. 13, 4 to 6 p.m.

ABOUT: The Berks Community Health Center will be offering tours of its primary care, dental, pediatrics and specialty care facilities. Staff will make appointments for medical and dental patients.

THE BERKS Community Health Center has a growing demand for dental care.

More than 800 patients are on a waiting list to receive dental services from the federally qualified health center, and that's only a starting point, said Dr. Malini Moni, chief dental officer.

"There is already a demand, and that's why we had to open at Rockland," Moni said.

Last week, Moni stood in the Berks Community Health Center's newest location at the former Giant supermarket at 1100 Rockland St. There, she showed a visitor 10 dental operating chairs that will soon be filled with patients who need preventive dental care, including root canals, crowns and bridges.

The federally qualified health center has been preparing to unveil its latest location, a supersized facility big enough to house 40 rooms for medical and pediatric exams, the 10 dental stations and additional space for optometry, podiatry, a pharmacy and other specialty care. An open house is slated for Dec. 13.

The health center has a unique mission, as it is required to care for everyone regardless of their ability to pay. For low-income patients and their families, finding a dental provider always has been a challenge, Moni said.

The community health center, with its sliding scale discounts and mission to care for all, provides a great place for them to get back in the dental chair, she said.

When it comes to dental care, it's better to be proactive, she said.

"They (dental problems) build up, and then (people) come to us and there are a lot of things that need to be done," she said.

Full-service center

for health care

The health center is working on an innovative model for health care at its Rockland location.

The center's dentists, primary care doctors and other specialists will be under one roof.

That means a primary care doctor can flag a patient's dental issue and send the patient about 50 feet across the hall to be seen by a dentist. Dentists who spot a health issue or need a blood sugar reading can send patients the other way to see a primary care doctor or nurse, as well.

"We integrate medical and dental care together," Moni said. "We customize their treatment based on what medical condition they have."

For patients with diabetes, cardiovascular disease and arthritis, dental care is an essential part of staying on top of their overall health, Moni said.

"If their diabetes is not controlled, they are going to have huge bleeding gums and a dry mouth because of all the medication they take," Moni said. "They are going to have cavities and their gum disease is going to make their situation worse."

Having providers working together and sharing information over the same computer system provides an opportunity for better care.

“Rather than the treatment being split between different specialities and centers, we can do it all right in one place,” Moni said. “We have medical right across from us so it becomes all in one.”

That team approach provides a big advantage, said Dr. Mary Kelleher, chief medical officer for the health center.

“In health care, we have this attempt to separate things,” Kelleher said. “What’s unique is the ability to learn from each other, share medical records and have insight into what they’re doing and what could impact their oral health.”

Separating the mouth from the rest of the body is not a worthwhile strategy, Kelleher said.

“If you’re going to the medical doctor and ignoring the oral part of your health, you’re fighting a battle that could be handled better if both things are addressed,” Kelleher said.

Growing demand

Most of the patients on the health center’s waiting list will be seen at the new Rockland site. There are many more in Reading and beyond who need affordable health care, Kelleher said.

For low-income patients, finding dental care has not always been easy, she said.

“I think it’s going to be a very needed, very welcome service to the community that has not been present for a long time,” Kelleher said.

When patients learn about the importance of regular dental visits, it becomes part of their routine, Moni said.

“When they come here, they get that knowledge,” Moni said. “This is not separate. This is something they need to do. Once they get that knowledge they automatically understand it, and it becomes their practice.”

As she walked through the new dental suite, Moni appeared confident the health center’s dental program was at the beginning of something big.

“Soon all these chairs will be full,” she said.

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