

a habit of helping

By Lindsay Willis

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Indraneel Bhattacharyya, D.D.S., makes a habit of helping others. His latest inspiration was to provide dental treatment to persons who could not otherwise afford it.

His vision became a reality. With the help of student volunteers, Dr. Bhattacharyya, assistant professor of oral biology in the UNMC College of Dentistry, operates free oral cancer screenings at the college on a monthly basis. The clinic, which began in February and continues through July, is open the second Saturday of the month from 9 a.m. to noon.

"I had worked at a similar clinic in Indianapolis and thought it would be a good way for the college to celebrate its centennial while helping the community," he said.

The clinic is open to persons who believe they are at risk. The highest risk factor is smoking. When smoking is combined with alcohol, the risk of oral cancer is greater. White males who are more than 65 years old account for the largest percentage of those affected. Middle-aged African Americans also are at great risk.

More than 21,000 new cases of oral cancer are diagnosed each year

in the United States and 6,000 deaths result from it. Oral cancer can metastasize to distant tissue and vital organs and can be fatal.

For Manuel Rivera, a non-English speaking resident of Lincoln, the clinic was the perfect solution. Although Rivera was not considered at high risk for oral cancer, he had noticed a small lump developing on his tongue. Concerned about the lump's origin, he made an appointment at the Urban Indian Medical Center in Lincoln, Neb.

The physician suggested Rivera have the lump examined and referred him to UNMC's free clinic.

Fortunately, after a brief examination, Dr. Bhattacharyya determined that Rivera's lump was not cancerous.

"A simple examination can detect the early stages of oral cancer. If suspicious lesions are present, we will perform a biopsy," he said. "Any patient who is in need of further treatment will be referred."

The university is able to provide health care at little or no cost to the patient. Student volunteers help meet that goal.

Assisting Dr. Bhattacharyya are student volunteers from the college. Traditionally, dental students begin seeing patients in a clinic setting during their third and fourth years of school. By volunteering to help

with the free screenings, students are able to see patients as early as their sophomore year.

"This will be my first chance to see patients," Molly McInteer said. "I think a lot of students are willing to work on a Saturday in order to see more patients."

For Cade Hunzeker, a junior who regularly treats patients during clinic at the college, the screenings are an opportunity to see abnormalities he may not see elsewhere.

"Usually, when there is an abnormality in the clinic, the patients are screened out and given to senior and graduate students who are more experienced," Hunzeker

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Dr. Indraneel Bhattacharyya

said. "By volunteering here, I have the opportunity to see a broader spectrum of patients."

Dr. Bhattacharyya said with the continued support of the students and the college he would like to expand the screenings to more than one day each month and eventually take the clinic to Omaha and other Nebraska communities.

For more information, call (402) 472-1301. *d*