Addressing a need

College, Swinomish tribe team up to offer dental therapy

Rachael Hogan sits at a simulation pod with dental tools and a mannequin to be used by dental therapy students for hands-on practice.

**BY BENJAMIN LEUNG**

SWINOMISH — The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community has had a difficult history when it comes to receiving dental services.

In the 1970s, traveling dentists staffed a small trailer provided by Indian Health Services.

“Tribal elders tell Rachael Hogan, director of the Swinomish Dental Clinic, stories of hearing patients screaming from inside the trailer and dentists in bloody aprons.

“If they didn’t experience the pain, they could at least hear the noises, and that’s their story about how dentistry was delivered,” Hogan said.

**Dental therapy**

Skagit Valley College and the Swinomish tribe are jointly launching the first program in the state to train dental therapists.

Dental therapists serve as mid-level dental providers, performing procedures such as fillings and simple extractions. Whereas a dentist is trained to perform about 500 procedures, a dental therapist is capable of performing about 50, Hogan said.

The low-cost Dental Therapy Education Program will consist of 28 months of a tightly condensed curriculum that Hogan says the dental therapists at the Swinomish clinic call “dental bootcamp.”

Native American community face challenges when it comes to access to oral health care.

A study examining the prevalence of tooth decay among American Indian and Alaska Native children ages 2 to 5 found rates of decay three times the U.S. average, according to a data brief by Kathy Thoppay and Timothy Ricks.

Prior to hiring dental therapists to work at the Swinomish Dental Clinic, wait times for a dental appointment for tribal members ranged from two to three months, said Brian Wilbur, a tribal Senate member.

The addition of three dental therapists to the clinic’s staff has reduced average wait times to a week, Wilbur said.

Dental therapists free up time for dentists to perform more complex procedures, Hogan said.

“Instead of doing cleanings and fillings, I can do crowns and bridges, partials and den- teries, and extractions and root canals, because there’s still a ton of dentistry out there to do or be done,” Hogan said.

Additionally, within the Swinomish tribe, dental therapists work alongside laypeople to conduct community outreach and education regarding dental health and services.

Once a week on Wednesdays, dental therapists and laypeople from the Swinomish Youth Clinic visit to talk to kids about brushing their teeth and to perform visual exams.

The Swinomish Dental Therapy Education Program will allow the tribe to train providers from the community.

**U.S. clears updated boosters targeting newest variants**

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. on Wednesday authorized its first updated COVID-19 vaccine, booster doses that target today’s most common omicron strain. Shots could begin within days.

The move by the Food and Drug Administration breaks the recipe of shots made by Pfizer and rival Moderna that already have saved millions of lives.

The hope is that the modified boosters will blunt yet another winter surge — and help tamp down the BA.5 omicron relative that continues to spread widely.

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