

Aging Happens: Home dental care an option for seniors

By Ellen Waldman

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Bill, who had some mobility and cognitive difficulties, lived in assisted living in Ashland. He continued to see his dentist twice yearly since, fortunately, he still had all his original teeth. The dentist felt Bill would be better served by coming in every three months, as his ability to manage his dental hygiene was declining. Going to the dentist that often was getting to be too challenging for Bill. Fortunately, there is an amazing service from a registered detail hygienist where Bill can be treated in the comfort of his own home. What a great option!

Pamela Phillips (compassioncaremobile@gmail.com; 541-944-8860), holds a registered dental hygiene license (RDH), with an expanded practice permit (EPP) from the state of Oregon. The Oregon Dental Hygienists Association (ODHA.org) has a link to other EPP hygienists in Oregon.

She was so patient, kind and professional that Bill relaxed and enjoyed the entire process. Even though he continued to go for his yearly examination with his dentist, these three additional visits could now happen at home. Recently, Pam discovered an area around one tooth that was concerning to her. She got in touch with his dentist, who examined Bill and determined he needed to have a tooth extraction. It was really excellent that Pam detected this early. Here's more information about these services.

1. What are "In-Home Adult Dental Hygiene Services"?

These services benefit all seniors who have barriers to direct dental hygiene care. I treat clients in their own homes, nursing homes, foster care homes and assisted living facilities. I provide an array of dental hygiene services, just like you'd receive in a dental office, but in the privacy and comfort of your own home. I come with a completely mobile system. Because every client is unique, I always start with an oral tissue evaluation to diagnose overall gum health. I also do an oral cancer screening exam. This is a six-part evaluation where I look at lips, tongue, inside of cheeks, throat, neck and inside and outside of lips.

The cleaning process is also an individualized treatment, which includes periodontal scaling (deep cleaning) to light hand scaling, polishing and flossing. I also provide instructions for self-care and supply the necessary brushes, flosses or picks. I work closely with family members and caregivers, when necessary. Fluoride application to prevent decay is available, as well as soft relines for dentures.

2. How do you coordinate care with the person's dentist?

One of the very first things I ask is if the client has a current dentist of record. Often they are established with a local dentist, but sometimes they are new to the area. I have also established collaborative agreements with local dentists, in the event a client does not have a dentist. I communicate with the client's dentist with reports of my treatment and findings, so there is always continuity of care. (I will add that Pam also communicates thoroughly with others on the "care team", if requested.)

3. How did you decide to start services like this?

I decided to start my own business offering mobile dental hygiene services in 2012. In my 22-plus years as a private practice hygienist here in Ashland, I have seen first-hand the increased need for seniors who have difficulty getting to the dentist. It was my hope to be able to care for my own aging clients that could no longer get to my office, as well as others who have difficulty accessing care.

4. Anything else you think people would want to know?

Gum disease is the most common cause of tooth loss among seniors. Dental decay is the most prevalent chronic disease in seniors, even though it is largely preventable. The good news is it has decreased over the last 30 years, mostly due to increased access.

Thanks to Pam's services and early detection, Bill's outcome was that his extraction went without a hitch. He's back on schedule now enjoying his home visits with Pam, three times a year. What a great service for all those who might otherwise not get the dental care they really need.