Volunteers wanted

CommunityHealth clinics look to expand services following grant from Cook County

by Joanna Brown

Bike to the office. Meet up with an assistant who is ready to work, too. Do your best dentistry. Chart your treatment. And pedal home again. Sounds like a dream.

In fact, it’s Reshma Dhake’s passion: the four hours she spends each month as a volunteer dentist and dental director in CommunityHealth’s West Town dental clinic feeds her soul.

“You really feel gratitude from each patient. They appreciate that it’s free care and that you’re donating your time, and they express their thanks in various ways.’

“I'm a practice owner, but I think really since I graduated my heart has been in public health,” said Dr. Dhake, a 2004 graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Dentistry.

“When I was a student at UIC (where they have a dental clinic for uninsured patients), you can really see the need for better access to care every day.”

Founded in 1993, CommunityHealth is the largest volunteer-based health center in Illinois. It provides primary care and 25 specialty and diagnostic services by appointment at no cost to low-income, uninsured patients. A grant enabled CommunityHealth to add dental care to its menu of services in 2010. Of every $1 they receive, 96 cents goes toward patient care.

With clinics in the West Town and Englewood neighborhoods, CommunityHealth reported 27,000 medical/dental visits in 2011, which provided services for nearly 9,000 uninsured individuals — all delivered by volunteer healthcare professionals. Dentists provide Phase I general dentistry for qualified patients; they are adults who do not have insurance, nor do they qualify for Medicaid.

And since CommunityHealth received $1 million from the Cook County Board in 2011 to provide outpatient dental care for patients of the Cook County Health and Hospital System and plans to expand services, volunteer recruitment has become a top priority.

Dr. Dhake answered a similar call from CommunityHealth for help two years ago. She said their partnership worked for several reasons — not the least of which is that she lives close enough to the West Town clinic to bike there.

“I could set my own schedule for as little as four hours a month, and that was appealing,” she recalled. “I could basically show up and do dentistry, I’d have an
assistant, and after I charted my clinic notes I wouldn’t have to worry about anything other than doing great work.”

Now also the dental director, Dr. Dhake has some administrative responsibilities — but not enough to lessen her enjoyment of providing great dentistry.

“You really feel gratitude from each patient,” she said. “They appreciate that it’s free care and that you’re donating your time, and they express their thanks in various ways.”

Because patients are seen by appointment only, and it is up to the volunteer dentist to let the clinic manager know how the schedule will go, the dentist determines how many patients will be scheduled during his or her shift.

Dr. Dhake usually sees five or six patients in the two-chair clinic, for services that range from X-rays to extractions. She sees many patients multiple times and develops relationships with them because of the appointment-only scheduling.

“Another great reason to volunteer is that you can pick your schedule. The clinic can accommodate almost any hours you have available; even if it’s four hours a month, you’re able to help the access to care issue directly.

“The biggest resource we have is time,” she continued. “We can give time and skills to directly address the puzzle that’s before our profession.”

Ms. Brown is the CDS senior writer.