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My Observations During Recent Dental Clinics Held In Hamilton County, Tennessee, Schools *

Dr. Westanna O. I. Byrom, '33

RECENTLY a program was launched in Hamilton County by the Chattanooga Health Council and the P. T. A. Council, for the purpose of rendering dental health service to the children in the county schools whose parents were unable to pay for their dental service.

The project furnished a rich fund of interesting and authentic dental health information, not otherwise readily available to the children, and was unusually helpful in arousing interest in the parents and teachers. The project did much to increase the understanding by parents and the general public of what P. T. A. groups are doing for schools and to secure better cooperation by parents with the schools.

As a young practitioner, the work was very fascinating to me. I could very readily see the urgent need of including some type of dental program in the school system whereby the children of indigent parents might receive dental treatment.

It revealed to me the tremendous task at the hands of dentists to disseminate information to parents regarding the care of the children's mouths.

The project was begun with the white schools in March. Upon investigation, it was found that the colored children might receive the same service if their P. T. A. organizations were in accord with the movement. As the chairman of the Health Council is a dentist, he was very favorably disposed toward the colored children receiving the service. It was the latter part of March before plans were finally made for the colored schools to receive the service.

In this set-up, the dentist was required to furnish all materials, instruments and medicines as well as transportation to and from schools, while the state furnished the equipment. A fee of \$15.00 per day was allowed the dentist. Ten dollars to be paid by the P. T. A. of the school served and five dollars by the state. As it was rather late in the school year and most of the organizations were burdened with debts, we were able to serve only fifty per cent of the schools before closing time, May 20th.

When a clinic was held, it was required that as many children

* These observations were made before the Tennessee State Dental Society, June 6, 1938.

as possible be served. I treated as many as twenty-six in one day, which was quite a task. We were advised that only emergency treatment, such as extractions, fillings of those teeth which were possible to save and removal of excess amounts of calculus, be administered. No prophylaxes were given, as too much time would have been consumed.

In some communities, parents were very enthusiastic over the movement, while in others they were reluctant.

Each child, who was examined, needed a prophylaxis. Only about ten per cent said that they possessed tooth brushes. About the only dental treatment any child that I examined had received, was the extraction of an aching tooth. Extensive tooth decay and one or more abscessed teeth were found in the mouths of at least eighty-five per cent of the children. Of course, we know this to be the result of ignorance, malnutrition and neglect.

On a whole, the attitude of the children was quite commendable. Only a few were afraid and rebellious. These children were always allowed to return to the classroom and treated last. By this time they had mustered up courage and made lovely patients. Some children feared dental treatment because their first visit to the dentist was delayed until their teeth ached or had become abscessed, which caused them to associate dentistry with pain.

In summarizing my observations:

1. It was found that health officials are in accord with having dental health service given the colored groups, equal to those of whites, but some seem to find a reluctance on the part of the Negro when it comes to being enthusiastic over health projects.
2. Negro children and parents are in definite need of dental health education.
3. More drives, that will do more for the child than merely examine his mouth and chart findings, need to be sponsored.
4. In my opinion, it seems that more health lectures should be presented to the P.-T. A. groups than to the student bodies, as all children coming to the dentist, come through their parents' or guardians' advice and most parents do not even know the necessity of caring for the deciduous teeth.
5. We dentists, are going to find it necessary to become more civic-minded and go a bit out of our way to have the masses of parents display a reasonable amount of interest in the care of the child's mouth.