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About a Dozen Medical Professionals Provide Free Services for the Poor

By [Raam Wong](#)

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On most days, Diana Puentes' smile could lift the spirits of a Wall Street investor.

But every few weeks her gums, lips and cheeks swell up like a chipmunk. The swelling and pain are the result of numerous teeth whose roots have become infected over the years and have been left untreated due to Puentes' poor access to dental care. "I had a lot of pain," the 32-year-old said.

The few times she has seen a dentist in her native Ciudad Juárez, the only affordable option was to pull the offending teeth, leaving her with five molars missing — about 25 percent of her bite.

So on Saturday, Puentes opened wide for some free critical care aimed at saving some of her front and upper-back teeth. Puentes was to undergo, count 'em, four root canals, all in one day.

The surgery was being performed by dentist Gabriel Roybal, one of a dozen medical professionals providing free treatment and screenings to some 65 mostly low-income families who might otherwise never seek care.

The families were identified by Alicia Burrola of the United Way's Santa Fe Children's Project. Among other things, the program provides pre-kindergarten at Agua Fria and Kaune Elementary Schools.

Burrola also visits with parents in their homes, helping, for instance, one family enter an installment plan to pay off a hospital bill and another to find counseling.

Burrola recently also identified the health concerns of some of the families and helped schedule them appointments for Saturday's medical marathon.

The services were being provided by the doctors, hygienists, chiropractors and other medical pros who work at the St. Michael's Professional Center near Christus St. Vincent hospital.

"The whole team of professionals are just doing what they do," said Teresa Roybal of Elan Creative Group, based inside the building.

Over in Operatory 3, Puentes was completing Hour 2 in the dentist's chair. "What's obvious is access to care for her is minimal," said Dr. Roybal, adding that the work being done on Puentes would ordinarily cost about \$4,000.

The surgery will improve the odds that she can keep her teeth. But after the root canals, Puentes will still require expensive crowns. "Where is she going to get those?" Roybal asked.

Those types of questions were on the minds of many of the providers Saturday as they saw the patients, most — if not all — of whom lacked health or dental insurance.

"It's scary. And it makes me very frustrated," said plastic surgeon Daniel Ronel, who was providing skin cancer screenings. While efforts like Saturday's event help get at-risk people into the health care system, the only real, long-term solution, he said, would be universal health care along the lines of one proposal put forward by Gov. Bill Richardson.

Back on the dentistry side of the building, one man came in complaining of a sharp pain on the right side of his mouth. During a screening, dental hygienist Joy Horn discovered the man had a gum infection and elevated blood pressure — conditions that often go hand in hand and put a person at higher risk of a heart attack.

Horn gave the patient written information about "pre-hypertension" in Spanish and wrote a letter to La Familia Dental Clinic describing his condition. But what will become of the patient after Saturday's visit is anyone's guess. Clinics don't have the time or resources to provide comprehensive care or many important services like early intervention, Horn said. "I would just like to see us come up with some good solutions to see to it that everyone gets the care they need."

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