

Homeless, Not Toothless

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Street people in Los Angeles know to "call Dr. Grossman" if they have a toothache

Homeless people tend to operate their own insider network, sharing tips on the best places to get a free meal or to bed down for the night. And in Los Angeles, a street person with a toothache will probably get the word to "call Dr. Grossman."

Through his Homeless, Not Toothless program, Jay Grossman, DDS, is trying to make a difference for hundreds of men, women and children who find themselves living on the streets and in shelters. The Brentwood dentist organized the project about one year ago in response to the evergrowing numbers of homeless people panhandling on the street corners.

"It got to be very annoying. When I did give them money, I had to wonder if it was going for drugs or alcohol," he said. Grossman also realized that even if the money was spent on food rather than on drugs or alcohol, it still wasn't enough to pull the panhandler back into the mainstream of society.

It started thinking about his own skills as a dentist and what he had to offer. So instead of a few bucks, Grossman started handing out his business card... because it couldn't be sold for a bottle of booze. "I felt if we could provide the homeless with quality dental care, maybe it would raise their pride and dignity and they could gain employment," said Grossman. Dozens of the homeless card-holders did in fact call his office and schedule appointments for much-needed dental care.

Soon, however, Grossman realized he was hardly making a dent in the problem of providing free dental care to the homeless. To have more of an impact, other dentists had to share his vision. He took his concept before the board of the Western Los Angeles Dental Society and they chose to adopt Homeless, Not Toothless as a project. To promote the program, Grossman wrote an article for the dental

society newsletter and spoke at continuing education classes in the area. Within months, three dozen dentists were involved. "I was thrilled.

Now my goal is to take the project statewide and then nationwide," he said. "If every dentist would give just one hour a month, the homeless would have no more dental needs."

His efforts already have been recognized by ADA, who last fall notified Grossman his project had won first place in the Johnson & Johnson-sponsored Preventive Community Dentistry award. The Homeless, Not Toothless project is organized to make it easy for dentists to donate professional services. They are asked to commit to only one patient a month.

In the Los Angeles area, the project

operates through the Venice Family Clinic, a non-profit medical facility that treats the homeless. At the clinic, patients are screened by physicians to see if true dental problems exist. Prospective patients also are screened for their appropriateness to be treated in a private dental practice.

"With the homeless, there are two categories: those who want to help themselves and those who, for whatever reasons, aren't interested," explained Grossman. "Obviously, we're only focusing on those who want to help themselves and be gainfully employed."

The program also has worked out great for the participating dentists because they don't have to leave their offices. And amazingly, the show rate exceeds 95 percent. "These people are truly in

terested in their own well-being. They want to break away from being homeless and get their lives together," he added. "They are thrilled to be getting dental care and to be treated in a non-clinic environment."

Because dentists who volunteer for Homeless, Not Toothless are asked to see just one patient a month, there's not an excessive outlay of time or expense. Also, area dental laboratories have been very supportive of the project. Many of the dentists asked their labs to consider helping out. Now approximately a dozen labs in the L.A. area donate crowns, a denture and a prosthetic device each month.

Grossman said the dental problems encountered in the homeless are much the same as in the general population,

although they're often more severe. There's a lot of periodontal disease, caries and missing teeth.

"Aesthetically, there's no way an employer is going to hire a person with obvious missing teeth, so we do a lot of flippers." Since the project first began, Grossman estimates dentists have donated services for hundreds of patient visits, to the tune of about \$50,000.

The beauty of the project is that it will work anywhere there are homeless people and dentists. All that is needed is a person willing to orchestrate the project and a medical clinic in town willing to do the prescreening.

While he realizes the project is not a panacea for the social problem of homelessness, Grossman makes a strong case for the difference it can make. "A toothache can sap energy, concentration and drive; unsightly or missing teeth can turn off potential employers more quickly than a few lapses in one's employment record.."

The doctor points to a patient named Jim as an example. "I happened to be in my waiting room when a man dressed in business attire came in. When he realized I didn't recognize him, he told me that I had treated him several months ago in the homeless program. He was hired by a big real estate company and was earning \$14 an hour, plus benefits. He said he was able to get the job because he was no longer having dental pain. Jim is just one of the success stories."

Because of the outstanding participation of Los Angeles dentists in the Homeless, Not Toothless project, Grossman now sees only a few homeless patients a month, instead of six a week. But he hasn't stopped handing out his business card to street people panhandling for spare change.

-Joanne Boyd

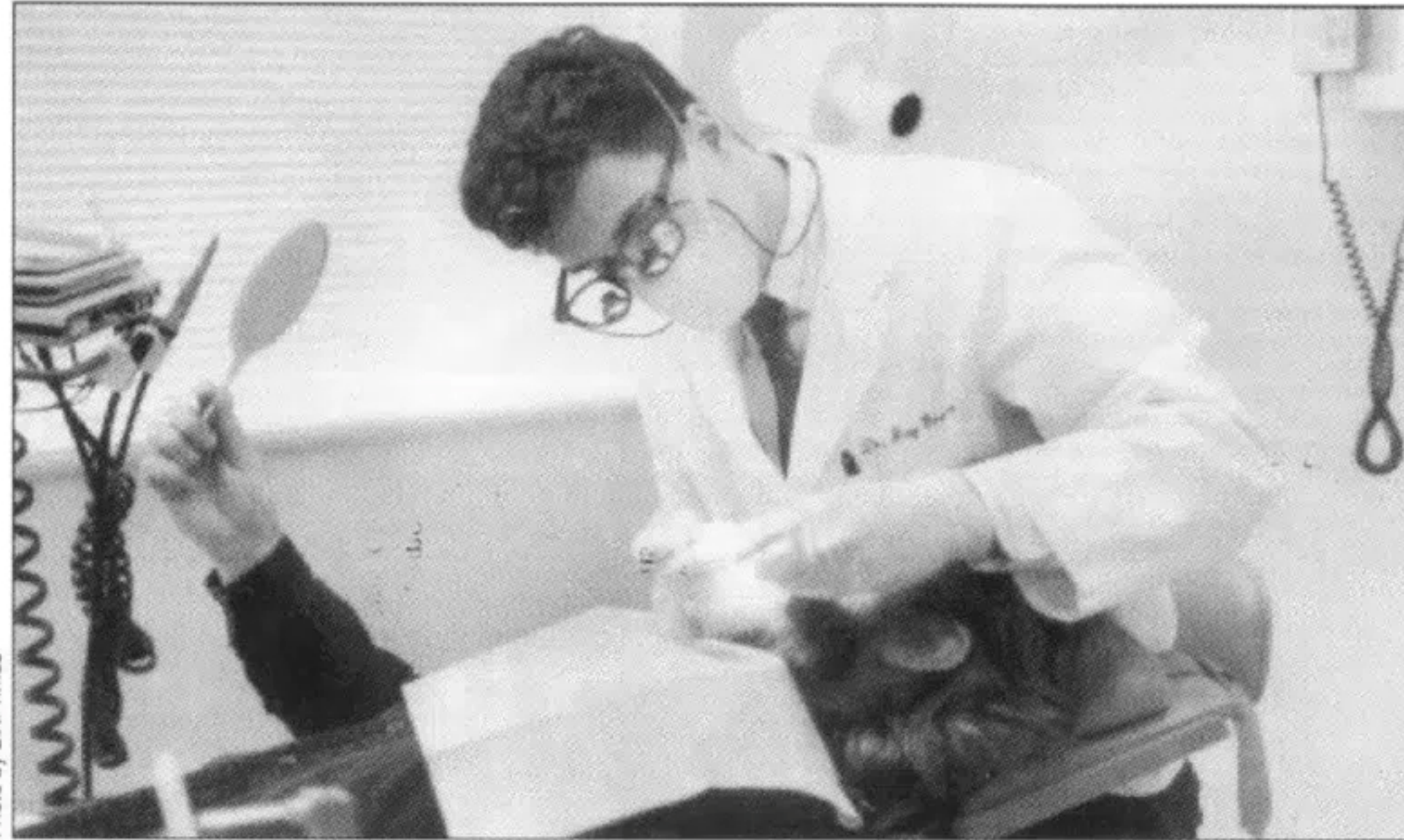


Photo by L.A. Times

Dr. Jay Grossman, in his Brentwood office, works on homeless patient John Payne.