

## **Giving the homeless a reason to smile**

**Spencer Anderson**

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The Care-A-Van and Cumberland dentist Dr. Bill Armstrong are celebrating the anniversary of a team effort to improve the lives of local homeless people, tooth by tooth.

For the past two years, Armstrong has donated his services and worked with the mobile care clinic to treat dental problems for those who are less fortunate.

From September to May, he sets aside a day from his regular practice once a month to see to the canine, molar and bicuspid maladies that afflict his Care-A-Van patients.

The partnership began after coordinator Helen Boyd delivered a talk on the Care-A-Van project at a Cumberland Rotary Club meeting.

She mentioned that the service was hoping to add dental care to the list of basic medical care the Care-A-Van already offered, "and of course, everyone turned and looked at me," said Armstrong with a smile.

He walked over to Boyd after the meeting and handed her his card. The rest, as the cliché goes, is history.

Armstrong and his staff see roughly 10 patients per visit, all of whom are pre-screened by dentist Yvette Menard and certified dental assistant Shelly Woodrow at an appointment set up by the Care-A-Van.

After their symptoms and complaints are assessed, an appointment is scheduled, and a volunteer drives the patients to Cumberland Dental Centre to be treated.

Once in the reclining dentist chair many have come to dread, the patients are finally provided relief from the throbbing pain that goes along with decaying teeth, infection, or exposed nerves.

Sometimes, teeth may need to be pulled out, but Armstrong also regularly performs more complex procedures such as root canals if the tooth can be saved.

It's treatment that would otherwise be out of reach for the homeless, as dental care tends to fall between the cracks of the social safety net, Armstrong said.

John, a homeless man who travels along the length of Vancouver Island, recently saw Armstrong in relation to a few broken caps and a mouth full of broken teeth - help that is hard to find elsewhere, he said.

"I just find the compassion the Comox Valley has for less fortunate people has just been wonderful," John said.

Mack MacDonald had three bad teeth pulled out, and received a fake tooth at the front of his mouth. He was able to proudly smile at his daughter's wedding.

"I wasn't expecting them to do that. It's kind of blown my mind, actually," MacDonald said.

For more information on the program, contact the Comox Bay Care Society by mail at 401 Ryan Road, Courtenay B.C., V9N-3R5, or by calling 250-702-7011. The society can also be reached at [comoxbay@mail.com](mailto:comoxbay@mail.com) or through [www.comoxbaycare.org](http://www.comoxbaycare.org).

The program resumes in September.

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