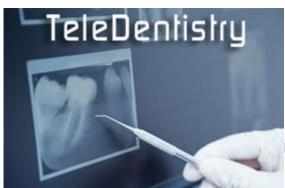# Can Teledentistry Take a Bite out of Childhood Tooth Decay in the O.C.?

Healthy Smiles for Kids of Orange County is on a mission.

According to their website: "Our mission is to improve the oral health of children in Orange County through collaborative programs directed at prevention, outreach and education, access to treatment, and advocacy."

A picture is worth a thousand verbal nudges

True to that intent, Healthy Smiles recently visited Danbrook Elementary School in Anaheim and set up a display that included sugary beverages like Hi-C, Coke, and Gatorade. Sugar packets were affixed to each bottle or can to indicate how many grams each beverage contained (i.e., nine grams of sugar in the Gatorade, fourteen in the soda). Of course it's one thing to hear that a serving of Coca-Cola has 14 grams of sugar in it, and another thing to see that via a vivid visual aid. The hope is that it makes a lasting impression on kids when they're choosing what to drink.

Healthy Smiles says that their teledentistry program is the largest pilot of its kind in the country. In addition to educational outreach as in the example of the beverage eye-opener, the program allows a dental hygienist and assistant to provide prophylactic services (including cleanings and X-rays) in classrooms. Information is sent from the school to a dentist who can then develop an approach toward treatment, if needed.

When obstacles to dental care include the pragmatics of getting a child to a dental office because of a parent's inability to leave work during office hours or unreliable transportation, it's apparent how the teledentistry program can help clear those hurdles.

In addition to working at Danbrook, Healthy Smiles also offers mobile teledentistry services at Wilson Elementary School in Santa Ana and Centralia Elementary School in Anaheim.

Program will receive a portion of a multi-million dollar grant

Last month one of the organizations providing funding for Healthy Smiles (the Children and Families Commission of Orange County) was the recipient of a $12.4 million Dental Transformation Initiative Grant awarded by the California Department of Health Care Services. Healthy Smiles is in line to receive a portion of that grant; they expect to use the money to expand the program in the coming years — specifically, their goal is to equip 80 different sites across Orange County with close to a dozen mobile teledentistry units.

Tooth decay: "the most common chronic childhood

disease"

The Center for Oral Health, based in Pomona, recently conducted a survey that revealed that around one-third of Orange County kids have tooth decay that is going untreated. According to Ria Berger, Healthy Smiles' chief executive, this rate of tooth decay is higher than the state average.

"It's rather strange being in Orange County because people have this conception about who we are … a glossy magazine coastline where everyone has straight teeth," Berger told *The Los Angeles Times*. "To the contrary, there's a dental health epidemic and [the American Dental Association] has said that tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease."

But the hopeful news is that the Healthy Smiles organization — through outreach, identifying need, and the latest telehealth technology — is poised to reduce the instances of untreated dental issues in the county.

"Imagine having a dental exam without meeting the dentist in-person, and in a classroom setting," Berger added. "[The students] meet with trained dental hygienists, the hygienists take their X-rays, upload them to a cloud-based system to a dentist and based on the data, they have 24 hours to confirm if kids need to be seen for a follow-up."