

April is Oral Health Month, a time to recognize health professionals who provide oral care to patients year-round.

In the feature below, we speak with a rural hygienist who carries out her dental care in an unusual clinic setting.

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Imagine lounging comfortably at your farm or in your driveway and listening to your favourite tunes, while having your teeth cleaned.

There's no hectic drive to the clinic: just step outside your house and climb into a fully equipped dental van.

That's the dream of Marilyn Alexander, a rural hygienist, who now takes her hygiene instruments on the road to rural residents requiring dental care within about one hour of Grande Prairie and occasionally to the community of Grande Cache.



Marilyn Alexander sits on the back of her dental van. Her dream was to bring dental care to rural Alberta patients who had trouble accessing traditional care in a brick-and-mortar clinic.

— Photo supplied by Marilyn Alexander

With the help of RHPAP's funding, Alexander will soon be able to administer local anesthesia for her patients who find the cleaning procedure uncomfortable due to sensitivities or have anxiety over someone working in their mouth.

Alexander has been a hygienist for 15 years. In April, she heads to the University of Manitoba to complete the Local Anesthetic Techniques Certification for the Dental Hygienist with support from RHPAP's Rural Education and Advanced Learning (REAL) Program. REAL was established to assist rural health professionals in accessing continuing professional development and educational opportunities to enhance the healthcare services in their communities.

One year ago, Alexander got her business, Shine Dental Hygiene, on the road literally. Set up in a reconfigured Ram ProMaster van, the vehicle is outfitted to look like a dental clinic but with aesthetic touches such as a hot pink dental chair, colour changing LED lights, aromatherapy scents, and music to suit her patients' genre.

"Farming and rural settings have their own unique set of challenges with access to dental care. Sometimes it's weather or seasonal work commitments that make maintaining a four-to-six-month re-care appointment impossible to keep," says Alexander.

"Now, my farming communities can skip the commute time and keep their appointments even if they are in the middle of haying or calving."



Hygienist Marilyn Alexander helps patient Ashlynn Facendi feel comfortable with the dental procedures to come in her mobile dental van.

— Photo supplied by Marilyn Alexander

She has brought the latest tools to her workplace, after spending several years of her hygiene career in Dubai after growing up near Winnipeg.

Often, she books the whole family for an appointment that can include X-rays, an exam, periodontal screening, scaling, polish, fluoride, and teeth whitenings.

“I wanted my rural people to be able to have the best-of-the-best that usually only the city people get,” says Alexander. She has also expanded hours from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., including weekends to help people schedule appointments that work with their schedules.



One of Marilyn Alexander's patients, Kellan Lambert, asked if he could bring his donkeys to his hygiene appointment. She said, "yes" believing they were stuffed animals. Nope, they were the real deal

and were great moral support.

— Photo supplied by Marilyn Alexander

The logistics with a mobile clinic are a little different. Alexander does have to take a little break between appointments on busy days (she can book up to eight appointments) to ensure the van's three batteries are fully charged to complete her work. She sterilizes her equipment in the evening so it's in order for the next day.

Alexander says word is spreading fast; she has seen about 600 patients since opening up her business.

The idea of having hygiene care come to you rather than the other way around is appealing to many.

"They love the fact that it's just me and them, they can control their environment. They tell me what music they want to listen to, what Netflix show they want to watch, what mood they want like putting the lighting off, on, or dimmed," she explains.

"We always let the kids pick the light colour to make it a fun experience. And if they say, 'hey, stop for a second,' we stop, as I get to control the timing of the appointment. There are no other people walking around them or strange noises."

Having that sense of control is important. Alexander remembers her own childhood dental experience as not being so pleasant.

"I'm very conscious of people with anxiety because growing up I had a not-so-great dental experience so I know what that feels like."

Alexander says the RHPAP funding will help provide even more comfort for her rural patients with the ability to do freezing when necessary.

"I'm completely funding this van on my own, so every little, tiny bit helps. This is going to make a massive difference and be able to free up funds for something else. It's going to help so many people."

Patients are grateful for the flexibility of the service.

“They are excited that I’m coming out to them. They are rural for a reason; they don’t want to go to the city.

“I park in your driveway, (you can) come out in your pajamas, it’s all good.”