

Carolyn Slavens, BSN, RN
Community Health Nurse
Springfield Greene County Health Department

Black Holes and Broken Hearts

When some people hear the word ‘Black Hole’, they think of outer space and being sucked into the black unknown by a powerful gravitational force. When I hear the word, ‘black hole’, I think of children, young children, lots of them. And I see 4-yr-old “Dustin Manley” in my mind’s eye. He sat there in the ‘dentist’ chair, his gaunt thin body expressionless in his camouflage T-shirt as I looked into his mouth. My heart sank. I wanted to cry out, “How can this be?” Instead, I looked into his face and said, “Does it hurt when you eat, honey?”

His pale little face remained expressionless as he shook his head from side to side, denying any pain. I knew otherwise. That tiny little body, that tiny little boy, that tiny little mouth – they were the result of a community that had failed. And we continue to fail young children. We are not a ‘healthy’ community.

After countless phone calls to the several dentists, the Department of Social Services, local charities, local hospitals, etc., Dustin was hospitalized. Several teeth were removed and many others were ‘repaired’ - as much as possible. At 4-years of age, a young child has 20 teeth. Dustin had 19 cavities in his 20 teeth. And many of those 19 needed more than one repair. Total cost to the medical system and our community in 2003? \$3850.00. That doesn’t include the hours used by others and myself in the community finding dental care for him.

And before you get upset with his parents, they have younger children whose teeth are in good condition. Dustin was their first child. Perhaps they were young and perhaps they didn’t know or hadn’t been told about the importance of primary teeth when they had Dustin. But as he grew, they knew he had a problem and they tried hard to find help for him, even applied for Medicaid and were denied.

The nurse who served his preschool knew his mouth was filled with black holes and so did his classroom teachers. Even more disturbing was the fact that his parents had taken him to his pediatrician for well child visits during his four years on earth. When I asked, “What does the doctor say when he looks into Dustin’s mouth?”, his mom answered in a frustrated voice, “He says I need to get them fixed!” Later I found out he had also been seen by a pediatric dentist. I asked, “What did the dentist say when he examined Dustin’s mouth?” Again the answer was the same, “I need to get them fixed,” she said defensively. She was angry. The problem was too big...for any one person. The solution to the problem was next to impossible without the financial resources to accomplish it ...and each year, the problem grew worse.

I knew the staff at the dentist’s office. They were good people. The reality? Although they did their share of charity care in our community, they have financial responsibilities of their own. And they cannot afford to offer free care to every needy child they see. There are way too many “Dustins”. They would be overwhelmed...just like the Federally Qualified Health Clinic

(FQHC) in our city. At the time I saw “Dustin”, there were 4,426 people on the FQHC waiting list; 2,076 were children under 18. Although we want to be, we are not a ‘healthy’ community.

Our department works to make tooth brushing in childcare a community standard, a parental expectation, and a childcare provider’s professional commitment to children. I don’t like ‘black holes’. They really break my heart. I have spent my own money (and others certainly have too) helping kids because dental care is not affordable or accessible for those in poverty or many working families. Public health doesn’t receive enough funding for programs such as “***We Brush, Too!***” (a public health program that provides tooth-brushing supplies and dental education to childcare facilities so young children can brush their teeth everyday while in out of home care).

Public Health Nurses, like me, are out in our community every day. We care about families. We care about children. We hurt for them. We cry. And we get angry, too. We need help and we need those who can help, to hear us. So how can readers help? Encourage tooth brushing with fluoride toothpaste at child care, at school, and at home. And encourage your elected officials to support Public Health programs in your community.

When Dustin and the other children were served popcorn at school, Dustin ate it because he wanted to be like the other kids. When he got home at night, his mom would spend the evening picking popcorn pieces out of his ‘black holes’. There are way too many Dustins in our city. What about yours? We are not a ‘healthy’ community but we could be.

“**Dustin Manley**” is a fictitious name.