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Oral Cancer Foundation Donates Screening Devices to West Virginia Free Clinics

Low-Income, At-Risk Patients Now Being Screened for Oral Cancer and Other Oral Conditions

NEWPORT BEACH, Calif., Feb. 23 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- In 2009 the Oral Cancer Foundation initiated a program of donating VELscope® Oral Cancer Screening Systems to free clinics. The most recent recipients of this program are two West Virginia clinics: WV Health Right in Charleston, and the Susan Dew Hoff Memorial Clinic in West Milford.

"Our intent is to identify free clinics in areas that have a high concentration of people who are both at risk for oral cancer and without the financial means to pay for comprehensive oral exams," said Oral Cancer Foundation founder and executive director Brian Hill. "It is difficult to think of an area that better fits those criteria than West Virginia." The state ranks highest in the country in tobacco usage, and next-to-last in per capita income. In identifying free clinics to be potential recipients of the device which identifies loss of tissue auto-fluorescence, an indicator of abnormal tissues, the Oral Cancer Foundation is careful to ensure that each candidate clinic has at least one dentist on staff who can be trained to use the device and can train other staff members.

Oral cancer belongs to the head and neck cancer group, and is often referred to by other names such as; tongue cancer, mouth cancer, tonsil cancer, lip cancer, and throat cancer. While some people think this is a rare cancer, it is not. Approximately 100 people in the U.S. will be newly diagnosed with oral cancer each day, and it takes a life in the U.S. every hour of every day.

WV Health Right was founded in 1982 by a small group of physicians and nurses who recognized the need for a source of ongoing health care for Charleston's low-income uninsured. The clinic has grown so much since its' founding that it is now in its third location. In 2001, it added a three-unit dental operatory, making it West Virginia's first free dental clinic. It now serves almost 20,000 patients per year thanks to over 180 medical and dental professional volunteers.

According to WV Health Right executive director Patricia White, "West Virginia has some of the worst oral health statistics in the country, in large part because of the relatively high percentage of residents who are spit tobacco users and smokers." Because of the well-established connection between tobacco usage and oral cancer, WV Health Right's dental clinic has always insisted on giving all patients a conventional oral cancer examination regardless of their reason for visiting the clinic. The conventional exam is a manual palpation and visual inspection of the oral cavity and the neck. "Now," says Ms. White, "our clinicians can also view the oral cavity using fluorescence visualization technology, which will enhance our ability to detect cancerous and pre-cancerous lesions that might be hard to see with the naked eye."

The Susan Dew Hoff Memorial Clinic serves over 1,800 active patients in West Virginia's Harrison County. Volunteers include five dentists, five dental assistants, and one hygienist. Roughly half of the patients are employed but without health insurance, while the other half are elderly and rely largely on Medicare.

"A high percentage of our patients use chewing tobacco, smoking tobacco or both," said clinic director Sister Mary Rebecca Fidler, Ph. D., RSM. "If patients have cancer or any other serious condition, they will want to know about it at the earliest possible time, when survival rates are the highest, and treatment related morbidity the lowest," she said. She added, "Up until now, we've discovered oral lesions on several patients merely by having our clinicians examine them using a visual and tactile conventional screening. Now, with this technology, we look forward to doing not only a better job of detecting early stage oral cancer, but even pre-cancerous tissues changes."

In the words of the Oral Cancer Foundation's Hill, "The key to reducing the death rate of oral cancer is earlier detection, and

the key to that is for all adults to receive opportunistic oral cancer examinations at least once a year." Mr. Hill pointed out that tobacco users, heavy alcohol users, and those with a prior history of cancer should be examined more frequently. Even people who do not share those traits should be examined annually in light of the mounting evidence of a link between oral cancer and the sexually-transmitted human papilloma virus.

Peter Whitehead, founder and chief executive officer of VELscope manufacturer LED Dental, said, "When we started our company, our goal was to help achieve a significant reduction in the incidence of oral cancer, by elucidating pre-malignant tissue abnormalities. Unfortunately, many times the people who are most at risk for the disease are also the people who cannot afford the regular dental exams that can allow us to discover these early or pre-malignant changes." According to Mr. Whitehead, "Now, thanks to the efforts of the Oral Cancer Foundation, our potentially life-saving technology is able to reach people we otherwise would likely have missed. Our relationship with OCF in this effort speaks to the core reasons that most of us at LED worked in the arena of adapting high technologies to enable better outcomes in the area of oral cancer. We could not be more pleased to see our technology end up in these underserved areas."

About the Oral Cancer Foundation: The Oral Cancer Foundation, founded by oral cancer survivor Brian R. Hill, is a non-profit 501(c)(3) public service charity that provides information, patient support, sponsorship of research, and advocacy related to this disease. It maintains a Web site at <http://www.oralcancer.org>, which receives millions of hits per month. At the forefront of this year's agenda is the drive to promote solid awareness in the minds of the American public about the need to undergo an annual oral cancer screening, and an outreach to the dental community to provide this service as a matter of routine practice. Supporting the foundation's goals is a scientific advisory board composed of leading cancer authorities from varied medical and dental specialties, and from prominent educational, treatment, and research institutions in the United States.

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