

TIMES-NEWS

Wellness Tree Clinic Expands To Dental, Chiropractic Care

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TWIN FALLS • In March 2000, Arne Walker had the cancerous tumor in his brain removed.

His health in disrepair, his hair falling out and his spirits diminished, his wife confronted him.

"She said, 'I think you've lost

your will to live; and I thought, 'You know, I think you're right,'" Walker said, "At some point, when you get so sick and so tired for so long, it doesn't seem worth it anymore."

In the 14 years since, however, Walker has reversed his outlook and decided to be a force for hope. As the new director of The Wellness Tree clinic, which treats qual-

ifying low-income patients at no cost, Walker has big plans to expand the clinic's footprint.

"I don't know what it's like to walk in (our clients') shoes, per se, but I know what it's like to be in a difficult spot," said Walker, who has been the clinic's director for about three months.

On Wednesday, Walker will un-

veil several steps the clinic is taking to meet his ambitions — groundbreaking for new dental and chiropractic clinics and the unveiling of a new lighted sign and logo redesign for the clinic.

"I like to dream big," he said. "I look at the needs, even though I don't know at the moment how to fill all those needs. If we come to-

gether as a community, we can find a way to do it."

The groundbreaking of the dental clinic will be supported by a donation from the Blue Lakes Rotary Club, presented during Wednesday's event. The public is invited to the catered open house event. The amount of the donation

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Rotarian

Clinic

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will be revealed during the event, which starts at 11:30 a.m. at the clinic, located off Shoup Ave. W. in the former hospital building, now Twin Falls County West.

Dr. Joel Newton, a Twin Falls dentist and periodontics specialist, said he thought the dental clinic was a great idea.

Dental care is not covered by Medicaid or Medicare and those in poverty are at greater risk for dental complications due to lack of access to dentists and preventative care, he said. He expects to see a lot of cavities, extractions and fillings at the clinic.

"As long as I've been around, Pocatello and Boise have always had clinics for people in need, but Twin Falls never has," said Newton, the former Rotary president and 23-year club member. "... I'm not seeing this to be a source of a lot of dental work or to get people out of the general dentist's office. I just want to get them out of the emergency room because they are not being taken care of there."

Walker said the donation will cover most, but not all, of the cost of the dental clinic, which he estimated will run between \$40,000 to \$50,000. He said he hopes to

have the free dental clinic up and running, open once a week, by the end of the year. But that will depend on how much support funding can be secured through grants. Walker said he is also seeking dentists and hygienists to volunteer.

"We have some names of folks that are interested once we are ready to go, but we don't have near enough," he said.

The chiropractic clinic, however, has secured several volunteer chiropractors and should have the necessary equipment to open in mid-September, he said.

"That's going to be a lot simpler. They don't need all the tools and expensive equipment (that a dentist needs) to do their work," Walker said.

Both expansions fit into the clinic's mission of reducing emergency room visits that annually cost Twin Falls County taxpayers millions in indigent care. Most of the things that send the uninsured and underinsured to the emergency room can be treated earlier, with less pain at a much-reduced cost, he said.

A round of antibiotics, he said, could prevent a \$20,000 week-long hospital stay. In fact, estimates show the clinic saves the state and county about \$2.5 million by treating patients before they go to the emergency room,

he added.

"If they don't have the insurance that will cover the exam at a chiropractic clinic, and they don't have the cash, they just deal with the pain," he said. "It impacts their work, their life, their family and what they can accomplish. If they aren't able to get to work, and lose their job, they end up on public assistance and we all pay for it."

Twin Falls County Commissioner Terry Kramer said he hoped the expansions would help reduce indigent care costs.

ing a portion of the cost of insuring patients participating in a federal insurance program. That federal program led to a temporary cost reduction, Kramer said, but it ended in January with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

Costs are on the rise again, he said, due to the number of people that still fall in the gap between Medicaid and healthcare plans found on the Obamacare marketplace.

"The dental thing is really important, a really valuable addition," he said. "I'm encouraged by seeing that. So many of our health issues can be tied to dental issues. I don't think chiropractic part will do much for our indigent care costs. But on quality of life, it'll be really good."