Volunteers wanted
CommunityHealth clinics look to expand services following grant from Cook County

by Joanna Brown

ike to the office. Meet up with an
assistant who is ready to work,
too. Do your best dentistry. Chart
your treatment. And peddle home again.

Sounds like a dream.
In fact, it’s Reshma Dhake’s passion:
the four hours she spends each month
as a volunteer dentist and dental direc-
tor in CommunityHealth’s West Town
dental clinic feeds her soul.

“You really feel gratitude from each patient.
They appreciate that it’s free care and that
you’re donating your time, and they
express their thanks in various ways.’

“I’m a practice owner, but I think
really since I graduated my heart has
been in public health,” said Dr. Dhake,
a 2004 graduate of the University of Illi-
nois at Chicago College of Dentistry.

“When I was a student at UIC (where
they have a dental clinic for uninsured
patients), you can really see the need for
better access to care every day.”

Founded in 1993, CommunityHealth
is the largest volunteer-based health cen-
ter in Illinois. It provides primary care
and 25 specialty and diagnostic services
by appointment at no cost to low-
income, uninsured patients. A grant
enabled CommunityHealth to add dental
care to its menu of services in 2010.

Of every $1 they receive, 96 cents goes
toward patient care.

With clinics in the
West Town and Engle-
wood neighborhoods,
CommunityHealth
reported 27,000 med-
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which provided services
for nearly 9,000 unin-
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provide Phase I gen-
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qualified patients;
they are adults who
do not have insur-
ance, nor do they qualify for Medicaid.

And since CommunityHealth
received $1 million from the Cook
County Board in 2011 to provide outpa-
tient dental care for patients of the Cook
County Health and Hospital System and
plans to expand services, volunteer
recruitment has become a top priority.

Dr. Dhake answered a similar call
from CommunityHealth for help two
years ago. She said their partnership
worked for several reasons — not the
least of which is that she lives close
enough to the West Town clinic to bike
to there.

“I could set my own schedule for as
little as four hours a month, and that was
appealing,” she recalled. “I could basically
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appealing,” she recalled. “I could basically
show up and do dentistry, I’d have an
assistant, and after I charted my clinic notes I wouldn’t have to worry about anything other than doing great work.”

Now also the dental director, Dr. Dhake has some administrative responsibilities — but not enough to lessen her enjoyment of providing great dentistry.

“You really feel gratitude from each patient,” she said. “They appreciate that it’s free care and that you’re donating your time, and they express their thanks in various ways.”

Because patients are seen by appointment only, and it is up to the volunteer dentist to let the clinic manager know how the schedule will go, the dentist determines how many patients will be scheduled during his or her shift.

Dr. Dhake usually sees five or six patients in the two-chair clinic, for services that range from X-rays to extractions. She sees many patients multiple times and develops relationships with them because of the appointment-only scheduling.

“Another great reason to volunteer is that you can pick your schedule. The clinic can accommodate almost any hours you have available; even if it’s four hours a month, you’re able to help the access to care issue directly.

“The biggest resource we have is time,” she continued. “We can give time and skills to directly address the puzzle that’s before our profession.”

Ms. Brown is the CDS senior writer.