

New Jersey Herald: Uninsured mom-to- be thankful for free clinic

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NEWTON -- A young mother-to-be is finding it a lot easier to smile than she has in several weeks, thanks to the free care she has been receiving from a local doctor and dentist who happen to be brothers.

In an ironic twist of fate, it also turns out to have been the father of the doctor-dentist pair, Dr. Frank Liegner, who delivered her when she was born at Newton Medical Center 22 years ago.

By her own account, Amy Crespo was in pretty desperate shape recently after having lost her job as a caretaker at a group home for the developmentally disabled. Now four months pregnant, she began suffering an acute infection of her mouth and gums shortly after becoming unemployed.

Without insurance and without any other means of paying for treatment, she figured her best option was to let the condition run its course. Instead, it got progressively worse and led to full-blown ulceration and bleeding of her gums.

The pain from the condition, which then spread to her lower jaw, became so excruciating that she was reduced to living on a diet of yogurt and mashed potatoes. Fearing that the lack of proper nutrition was putting her baby at risk, Crespo went last week with her sister Carol, 25, to the Sussex County Division of Social Services, where someone handed them a recent article from the New Jersey Herald about Dr. Jeffrey Liegner's free medical clinic, which opened last month in downtown Newton.

With her sister Heather, 19, accompanying her for support, Crespo left her home in Franklin Monday night and went to the free clinic not knowing quite what to expect. By the time she was seen by Liegner, the infection had entered her bloodstream and had begun causing a rash all over her body.

After prescribing penicillin, Liegner contacted his brother, Dr. Jonathan Liegner, a dentist, who



Photo by Amy Herzog/New Jersey Herald Amy Crespo, bottom, is seen with her mother, Janice, top left, and sister Heather. Amy went to the new free medical clinic in Newton and was diagnosed with a serious infection.

called Crespo at home the next morning and arranged for her to come to his office in Hackettstown.

When she arrived at his dental office with her mother that afternoon, it was clear that Crespo was suffering not only from medically induced pain but also from the stress brought on by her pregnancy and loss of her job, Dr. Jonathan Liegner said. He believes all of these factors, combined with her earlier hesitancy to seek care because of her inability to pay, may have played a role in exacerbating her condition, known as periodontitis. Untreated, he said, the condition can lead to permanent tissue and bone loss and, eventually, the loosening and loss of one's teeth.

"Amy's condition was one of the most severe cases I've ever seen," Liegner said. "Her level of pain was so remarkably bad that there was no way I could not do anything in my power I could to try to help her."

Liegner said if she had not sought treatment when she did, there was a real possibility Crespo's condition could have snowballed out of control and led to tooth loss or worse. Her baby also could have been put at risk from the spread of the infection, he said. Even so, before accepting treatment, Crespo told him she was worried about the cost.

"I told her at that point that she came through my brother's free clinic and not to worry about that," the dentist said. "I was taught to be a healthcare provider first and not a capitalist, and I have no problem giving back to people in need."

After undergoing intensive cleaning under her gums, Crespo was put on an intensive regimen of antibiotics.

Liegner has since been checking in with her regularly and last spoke with her by phone Friday night to see how she was doing, Crespo said.

A follow-up visit has been scheduled for her at his office on Sept. 11.

Following her treatment, Crespo said her mother, Janice, recognized Liegner's name on the prescription bottle she received from the pharmacy. Her mother then remembered that it was Liegner's father, Dr. Frank Liegner, who had been in the delivery room at Newton Memorial Hospital when she gave birth to Amy there 22 years ago.

"It's a neat circumstance of life and just shows how connected we all really can be if you look close enough," Liegner said. "My father was first and foremost a doctor, and what's amazing to me is when he passed away two years ago, so many people came up and thanked our family for allowing our dad to be there at the momentous times in their lives. That meant the world to me."

Crespo said she still is in awe of the kindness shown to her.

"I'm not used to being helped like that," she said. "I'm used to always being the one doing all the helping."

"Amy's a nice gal and was very concerned about her baby and had questions about that," Liegner responded. "The world is as close as we make it, and ultimately we all just have to work together. Jeffrey [Liegner] did good by reaching out to me for help, and I just wish for the sake of everyone in Sussex County and the surrounding area, if they need care, to speak up and say something."

The Free Clinic Newton, as it's called, officially opened last month and is currently staffed entirely by volunteer medical professionals under the supervision of Dr. Jeffrey Liegner. Part of the clinic's mission, Dr. Jeffrey Liegner has said, is to be a resource for those he calls "the poor and the proud," those who are between jobs or have suffered loss of medical coverage due to a variety of life circumstances yet are unwilling to incur debt or suffer the stigma of applying for charity care through traditional channels.

"The medical professionals in our community deliver free care to their patients every day," Liegner said. "It is just hidden in the offices and kept away from the public's view. Now, with the free clinic, we want the community to see there is a place that they can go instead of the emergency room for professional medical care."

The Free Clinic Newton is located at Moose Lodge 432, at 4 Diller Ave., about a block from the Camp Iliff building on Spring Street. The clinic currently offers walk-in hours to the public every Monday except holidays from 6 to 8 p.m.

The clinic is increasing the level of service with each month's experience and is recruiting volunteer physicians, nurses and community members who wish to be a part of it.

The clinic's services are intended for uninsured patients who make \$44,000 a year or less for a family of four, or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. However, no member of the public in need of care is ever turned away.

For details on clinic hours and services, visit www.FreeClinicNewton.org or call 973-729-5757 or 973-400-8432.