

dental reimbursements in its Medicaid program has not changed in 20 years, frozen at approximately \$11 million, an amount that now has half the buying power it once had.

Jennifer Ernst, a dental hygienist with the O'ahu Head Start Program, adds that these problems are compounded by the fact that a higher percentage of Hawai'i's children are cared for by willing-to-please grandparents and aunts.

"Most parents are working, so they can't control what's being given to their child," says Ernst. "We all reinforce good behavior with candy too much. Kindly relatives maybe more so."

Since current Medicaid reimbursements do not cover the cost of treatment and a maze of paperwork and procedures eats up administrative time, Wessberg says that volunteering his service is often an easier way to help those in need. However, Wessberg admits that people in Kalihi aren't the only ones who benefit from his volunteer work.

"Sometimes when I drag myself out of bed and head to the clinic, it feels like I was just there," says Wessberg. "But when I get there people are so appreciative that you can help out. I always leave there feeling great."

—DAVID K. CHOO

best hawai'i dentists

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37

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* Endodontics

An endodontist is a dentist who deals strictly with the pulp of the tooth, known popularly as the nerve or root. Endodontists perform root canals and other surgical procedures. Endodontists must have two or more years of continuing education after dental school, and most limit their practices to only endodontics.

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LIST CONTINUES ON PAGE 53



KARIN KOVÁLSKY

Wynn Okuda cosmetic dentistry

It may come as a surprise that Wynn Okuda, who has practiced dentistry for 15 years, considers himself a right-brained artist type. But Okuda says his passion for painting and sculpting complements his specialty, cosmetic dentistry, perfectly.

"The whole idea behind my practice is to recreate or enhance nature," says Okuda, president of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (AACD). "When people see my work, they shouldn't think, 'That's a good mouth reconstruction.' It should be, 'Wow, this person was born with great teeth.'"

The American Dental Association doesn't recognize cosmetic dentistry as a specialty. To find qualified cosmetic dentists, Okuda suggests checking their credentials—an AACD membership means they're focused on this particular field—and asking for before-and-after photos of their work, comparable to the procedure in which you're interested.

"Unfortunately, I often find myself correcting work done by other dentists," Okuda says. "Patients should find a good cosmetic dentist, or they're throwing money down the toilet. Whether they see me or someone else, patients should leave smiling."