

NEWS

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Low Income Families Face Dental Access Crisis ***70% of Medicaid-eligible children can't see a dentist***

MADISON (June 6, 2006) ----- Dental decay is the most common chronic disease in children, yet 70 percent of Medicaid-eligible children cannot find a dentist who is willing to take them as a new patient, according to Warren LeMay, DDS, MPH from the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS). That is the reason DHFS has proposed an administrative rule change that will allow dental hygienists to be certified as Medical Assistance providers and be reimbursed for services they already provide.

Currently, hygienists are helping thousands of poor children across the state get the preventive care they need. The new rule change would allow hygienists to bill the Medicaid program for services they are already providing in schools, public health settings and in technical colleges where dental hygiene is taught.

"The rule change will provide greater access to preventive dental care, which children are now not receiving through dentists," LeMay said.

When preventive dental care is not obtained, individuals do not seek treatment until it is far too late and often at a hospital emergency room, putting a great fiscal strain on the Wisconsin Medical Assistance program. Addressing the issue at the front-end through preventive care is a healthier and more cost-effective approach.

According to data provided by the WHA Information Center, Wisconsin emergency departments saw 11,243 Medicaid-eligible patients for dental-related health problems from October 1, 2004 – September 30, 2005, and 8,463 uninsured patients. In total, 31,795 hospital emergency department visits were dental-related during the same time period.

Judy Warmuth, RN, a vice president at the Wisconsin Hospital Association, said hospitals often see the end result of the lack of dental health care when individuals seek care at hospital emergency rooms.

"The negative impacts of providing care for preventable dental disease in the emergency department (ED) are: the wait for both the person seeking dental care, and for those who are seeking urgent care; the cost of providing dental care in a full-service emergency department, and the fact that that we can only treat symptoms in the ED, we can't provide the necessary follow-up treatment," said Warmuth.

"Hospital emergency departments are often the provider of last resort when dental pain becomes overwhelming for the patient," Warmuth added. "The cost of an emergency department visit, along with the suffering that the person has endured before seeking treatment in the ER, all speak to the importance of providing families with few resources preventive services that Medicaid covers, but they can't access," she said.

The Wisconsin Hospital Association joins many other organizations in Wisconsin in support of this provision that will allow hygienists to be certified Medical Assistance providers and bill the Medicaid program for preventative dental health services provided to eligible families.

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