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Dental Access & the Impact on Emergency Rooms

Background

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 said Warren Lemay of the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS). Therefore, many individuals who cannot find a dentist for their dental health care needs utilize the emergency room setting and the hospital emergency departments becomes the provider of last resort when dental pain becomes overwhelming for the patient. Unfortunately, this treatment in emergency rooms comes at a much higher cost than preventative dental treatment and typically only after dental health needs have progressed significantly.

Issues

- 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.
- The crisis is particularly severe urban areas like Milwaukee County. In 2005, Medicaid patients with dental needs were seen in Milwaukee County emergency room departments a total of 2,879 times. By hospital: Children's (293); Froedtert (236); Columbia (45); St. Francis (364); St. Joseph's (720); St. Luke's (473); St. Mary's (226); St. Mike's (522).
- In Milwaukee, the Madre Angela Dental Clinic serves more than 1400 dental encounters a month. The clinic is the result of Columbia St. Mary's, Aurora, and Wheaton Franciscan Health Care health care systems working together to provide oral health services to the most vulnerable and economically poor in the community. Using volunteer dentists and a dedicated staff including dental hygienists, Madre is often the provider of last resort to the underserved in the Milwaukee area. Madre also works closely with the Milwaukee Public School system in providing oral health screenings and dental sealants to children at their respective schools.



Wisconsin Hospital Association, Inc.

Emergency Room Usage

- Hospitals across the state continue to wrestle with the dental access crisis for the neediest, the poorest, and the most marginalized in Wisconsin. As part of their community benefits activities, hospitals like Meriter in Madison have created programs such as Seal Dane to meet these dental health care needs. Funded by Meriter Community Relations, with voucher support from the Meriter Foundation, Seal Dane is the first school-based dental sealant campaign to target third graders in Madison and Dane County Schools. This health effort, a collaboration between Meriter and Dane County Public Health, provides free sealants to eligible children. Dental disease in children can mean poor nutritional intake, missed time from school, poor learning and behavior problems so Seal Dane is an important tool in fighting the dental access crisis in Dane County. During the 2004-2005 school years, Seal Dane reached 550 students with oral health education and 431 students received sealants on 1,480 teeth.
- While larger communities like Milwaukee and Madison struggle with the dental access crisis, more rural communities are also hit. St. Joseph's Hospital in Chippewa Falls finds the dental access crisis so aggressive that they joined in 2001 with the Chippewa Falls 2010 *Achieving a Healthier Community* to work on improving access to dental care for the underserved and uninsured in Chippewa County. In January 2002, the Chippewa Oral Health Initiative was formulated and St. Joseph's Hospital worked with it and CESA 11 to open a dental clinic at the hospital, which was opened in 2003. Also in 2002 the hospital approached Marshfield Clinic to work collaboratively to replicate the federally qualified dental clinic it operates in Ladysmith, After six years of effort that federally qualified dental clinic will become a reality in Chippewa Falls. There are still over 600 children and individuals on area waiting lists right now.

WHA Position

- WHA believes that emergency department care is meant for emergent cases and should not be the provider of last resort for dental health care needs. To begin to address the access crisis, in 2006 WHA successfully worked with the legislature in support of an administrative rule change to allow dental hygienists to be certified as Medical Assistance providers and to be reimbursed for services they already provide. The rule change allowed 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, providing greater access to preventative care, which children are now not receiving through dentists. Addressing the issue at the front-end through preventative care is a healthier and more cost-effective approach. Wisconsin must continue to address the access crisis by innovative approaches such as it did by allowing dental hygienists to bill Medicaid.



Emergency Room Usage

WHA Staff Contact

Bill Bazan, VP, Metro Milwaukee

414/431-0105 or bbazan@mailbag.com

Jodi Bloch, VP, Government Relations

608/274-1820 or jbloch@wha.org

Related Resources

- None currently available

Localize The Message

Be prepared to talk about:

- The impact that emergency department dental health care has on emergency department crowding.
- The cost of dental health care emergency department visits versus preventative treatment.

