

ACCESS TO

Dental Health Services

It's Not Just About Pretty Smiles

Dental care is an important but often overlooked health care need. Millions of Americans, young and old, suffer from preventable oral diseases such as tooth decay, periodontal disease, and oral cancers. About 17 percent of preschool children and 78 percent of those under age 18 have tooth decay. And nearly half of all working adults between the ages of 18 and 64 have infections affecting their gums. Problems are greatest for low-income persons and racial and ethnic minorities. For example, among low-income children, almost 50 percent of tooth decay remains untreated. Nine percent of poor adults and nearly half of the poor elderly have lost all their teeth.

Oral health is about more than pretty smiles. Diseases of the mouth can affect the ability to speak, chew, and swallow (an important concern for growing children and frail seniors); be extremely painful; result in lost work and school days; and contribute to low self-esteem with implications for success at school and work.

Despite these debilitating outcomes, dental health has been a relatively low public health priority. The tide is changing, however, with the expected release of the Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health later this year. This Issue Focus takes a look at the nation's pressing dental health needs, effective strategies for improving oral health, and the efforts being made by health foundations at the community level.

THE PROBLEM

Much is known about the elements of good oral health: a healthy diet, a consistent pattern of dental hygiene, and access to fluoridated water. Even so, barriers persist. For example:

- Dental care is poorly insured. Only about 40 percent of Americans have dental insurance. Medicare offers extremely limited coverage; fewer than half of state Medicaid programs offer both emergency and basic coverage for adults; and less than one in five Medicaid eligible children receive dental services.
- Few dental providers serve the poor. Only half of federally funded community health centers provide dental services.
- More than 100 million Americans do not have access to water containing enough fluoride to protect their teeth.

- Many people are unaware of the importance of brushing and flossing, eating right, avoiding smokeless tobacco, using mouth guards during sports, and getting regular dental checkups.

WHAT FOUNDATIONS ARE DOING

Health foundations have embarked on a number of strategies that address access to dental health services.

► **Direct services.** The John Muir/Mt. Diablo Community Health Benefit Corporation has funded an elementary school to support dental care and education for students, many of whom speak only Spanish. Twelve community dentists voluntarily provide cleaning, repair, and extraction services in an off-site trailer. Working in partnership with the Newark Public Schools and Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, the HealthCare Foundation of New Jersey has supported medical and dental services for students at an elementary school in inner-city Newark. The California Endowment helped establish pediatric dental services at the Los Angeles Free Clinic and more recently funded another clinic to provide free preventive dental services to children of low-income families (including children of migrant workers) in rural California.

Others, such as the Columbus Medical Association Foundation and the California HealthCare Foundation, are focusing on special populations, such as increasing access to dental services in shelters and transitional housing. The Dr. John T. Macdonald Foundation, Inc. is supporting services for former welfare recipients. The Retirement Research Foundation has focused on funding

HEALTHY PEOPLE 2000 OBJECTIVES FOR ORAL HEALTH

- Reduce dental caries
- Reduce tooth loss
- Increase use of protective sealants
- Increase people receiving fluoridated water
- Prevent baby bottle tooth decay
- Increase care to children entering school
- Extend oral health services to long-term care institutions
- Increase use of protection in sports and recreation
- Reduce smokeless tobacco use by males ages 12 to 24

Oral health will be the topic of a break-out session at GIH's Annual Meeting on Health Philanthropy, March 1-3, 2000. Watch our website at www.gih.org for details.

services for nonmobile geriatric patients in retirement communities.

► **Education and outreach.** Several foundations support efforts to educate the public and providers about preventive strategies. These include:

- providing training and oral health services to low-income residents of rural areas (The California Endowment);
- funding design and distribution of educational materials about effective strategies for preventing early childhood cavities (Northwest Health Foundation); and
- supporting wellness programs at the K-3 level that include dental health components (Kansas Health Foundation and the Rose Community Foundation)

► **Fluoridation.** The per capita cost of water fluoridation over an entire lifetime can be less than the cost of one dental filling, making fluoridation a cost effective although still controversial method of preventing dental disease. Both the St. Luke's Charitable Health Trust and the Sierra Health Foundation have funded local fluoridation projects.

► **Multi-faceted strategies.** Three GIH Funding Partners have developed comprehensive initiatives to improve oral health in their communities: the Sierra Health Foundation, St. Luke's Charitable Health Trust, and the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund. Sierra's *brightSMILES* initiative was developed in 1998, making available \$500,000 to expand access to oral health services in 26 Northern California counties. In 1999, the California Endowment contributed \$1 million to the program, expanding its reach to six additional counties. Funding from *brightSMILES* is supporting dental sealants; fluoridation, prevention of early childhood cavities; school-based dental exams; primary dental services; dentist recruitment; capital equipment; and clinic renovation. Sierra is also funding the Dental Health Foundation to mount a seminar series for collaboratives funded under the Foundation's Community Partnerships for Healthy Children so that dental health can be included in these projects.

St. Luke's Charitable Health Trust is addressing oral health by using community-based prevention, public and professional education, and innovative financing incentives. Activities include:

- a funding program to support community organizations for costs associated with providing dental services to low-income families and nursing home residents.
- a dental insurance pilot program, targeting families receiving subsidized child care, in partnership with the

Department of Economic Security (DES), the Maricopa County Department of Public Health Services (PHS) and Delta Dental, a private insurer.

- a public education campaign, Healthy Smiles, focused on preventive oral health habits among children, in collaboration with the City of Phoenix, Phoenix Coyotes Goals for Kids Foundation, the Arizona Department of Health Services, and Delta Dental.
- a program to train school nurses to provide oral health screenings.

The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund is using three strategies in its \$1.25 million Healthy Teeth for Kansas campaign: funding community-based organizations to deliver sealants to low-income children; funding development and implementation of water fluoridation; and improving access to Medicaid dental services for children.

Previously, the Fund supported a public information campaign about the safety, availability, and effectiveness of fluoridation, and funded the Kansas Dental Association to hire a full-time community fluoridation coordinator to work directly with the public.

The Face of the Child: The Surgeon General's Conference on Children and Oral Health will take place on June 12-13, 2000 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. More information is available at www.nidcr.nih.gov/sgr/children/children.htm

RESOURCES

ORGANIZATIONS

Sierra Health Foundation
Tom Bennett, Program Officer, Health Grants
916/922-4755

St. Luke's Charitable Health Trust
Jane Pearson, Associate Director, Programs
602/808-9600

United Methodist Health Ministry Fund
Kim Moore, President
316/662-8586

National Maternal and Child Oral Health Resource Center
www.ncemch.org/oralhealth/
703/524-7802

National Institute of Dental & Craniofacial Research
www.nidr.nih.gov

Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health
www.nidr.nih.gov/sgr/sgr.htm

PUBLICATIONS

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Improving Oral Health: Preventing Unnecessary Disease Among All Americans*. At-a-Glance 1999. At www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/oh/ataglanc.htm

Guiden, Mary, "Dental Health: No Easy Solutions for a Preventable but Pervasive Problem," *State Health Notes*, 20:310, October 11, 1999.

National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health, *Trends in Children's Oral Health* (Arlington, VA: January 1999).

Spisak, Shelley and Katrina Holt, eds, *Building Partnerships to Improve Children's Access to Medicaid Oral Health Services*, National Conference Proceedings (Arlington, VA: National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health 1999).

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, *Developing Objectives for Healthy People 2010*, Draft for public comment. At www.web.health.gov/healthypeople/Guide/cover.htm