The Impact of Access to Dental Care on Health

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Abstract

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) reports that poor oral health is associated with adverse pregnancy outcomes, diabetes, and respiratory and cardiovascular disease. In 2007, twenty-five million Americans did not receive dental care. In 2009, 15.9 million children had not seen a dentist and 4.2 million additional children did not receive needed dental care. One million Missourians, many of whom rely on Medicaid, have a dental access problem.

The dental workforce has the most significant shortage of any health profession in Missouri. Two-thirds of all practicing dentists are over the age of 55 years and nearly seventy dentists retire yearly in Missouri. In ten years there will be a shortage of 2,000 dentists. Of the 3,754 dentists in Missouri, only a quarter participate in the Medicaid program.

Over 100,000 people could lose their Medicaid benefits if state budget cuts occur. Missouri spends an average of $5,000 per Medicaid enrollee (nearly $7 billion dollars annually). To increase coverage and reimbursement for dental health, Missouri needs to spend an additional average of $500 dollars per enrollee to meet basic exams plus cleaning yearly.

My recommendations to address the lack of access to dental care are as follows:

1. Prevent cuts to current Medicaid budget in order to maintain access to care;
2. Fund Medicaid to reimburse dental providers at the usual and customary rate;
3. Increase the number of dentists by 1,000 over the next ten years;
4. Consider a state mandate for rural dentists to serve Medicaid patients, same as urban dentists;
5. Train primary care physicians in application of sealants and fluoride.