

Emerging from the Shadows: Florida's Public Dental Health Program

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Florida's Department of Health and its Public Health Dental Program are continually looking for new and innovative ways to deliver dental health care education, prevention and clinical services to all people in Florida. Ultimately it takes public health dentists and private dental providers working in collaboration throughout the state to reduce the dental health disparities and improve the dental and general health of all people in Florida. Here are some of the reasons:

- 90% of Florida dentists are in private practice and fewer are accepting Medicaid patients each year. This trend places pressure on the safety net providers such as the Department of Health.
- 80% of dental disease occurs in approximately 20% of the population, many of which are disadvantaged and are dependent on Medicaid. The Department of Health through its county health department dental programs is the second largest provider of Medicaid dental services in the state, providing over 22% of Medicaid dental services. The Department provides dental services to more than 150,000 persons annually, with approximately 75% of those being children. Private dentists can help alleviate this pressure.
- Public dental health positions are going unfilled. As of August, there were 35 dental vacancies in Florida with an average vacancy rate of 286 days. Two positions were vacant since 2003; three since 2005; and three since 2006.
- Having an adequate dental workforce that is able to provide care to Florida's disadvantaged populations and to reduce disparities is an issue not only for safety net providers, but private dentists who must wrestle with the moral obligation when the needy person knocks on their door.

Public Dental Health is a Dental Specialty

There is a saying that claims "health care is vital to all of us some of the time, and public health is vital to all of us all of the time." While private practice dentistry may be more prominent and gets much of the notoriety, public health practice is a specialty of dentistry that tends to go unnoticed and is not very well understood. Public health dentists play a large and essential role in the health and safety of all people in Florida. They are highly qualified and dedicated group of providers and more are needed. Public Health Dentistry complements private practice by providing services to disadvantaged populations that are unable to access services from traditional private practice providers.

Public health measures are embedded in society, often taken for granted, and many times misunderstood. From the founding of the nation to the present day, the federal and state governments have assumed a duty to provide a significant amount of community and individual health and well-being through the provision of public health services. Public health is the approach to medicine that is concerned with the health of populations and the community as a whole. However, the benefits of public health are considerable to individual health as well. The focus of public health is to prevent disease and injury and to protect and preserve the public's health and welfare. As history has shown, personal and population-based programs can prevent

and control dental diseases and conditions at a reasonable cost. Population-based programs are the foundation of public health practice.

In May of 1976 the American Dental Association (ADA) recognized Dental Public Health as a dental specialty. Dental Public Health is the science and art of preventing and controlling dental diseases and promoting dental health through organized community efforts. It can include dental health education of the public, applied dental research, and the administration of group dental care programs.

Dental health is a priority of the current governor. The Public Health Dental Program leads the Department of Health's efforts to promote, protect and improve the oral health of all people in Florida. While the state dental program began in 1936, it currently is part of the Division of Family Health Services. The program is headed by a state dental director, with five program and two administrative staff. The Public Health Dental Program has two roles: supporting primary care dental services and providers in county health departments; and developing and supporting preventive and educational dental programs statewide and locally.

County health departments started providing clinical or primary care dental services as early as the 1940s in response to the results of a cross-sectional survey of Florida's schoolchildren that showed over 90% had dental decay. Currently, 49 out of 67 Florida counties provide primary care dental services, largely to Medicaid children, with one other program currently under development. Additionally, there are 12 mobile dental vans in 10 counties that service both local and adjacent counties. County health department dental services have a total of 353 operatories and account for 194 dentist positions (full and part-time) for a total of 104.5 full-time equivalents (FTEs); 42.31 FTEs for dental hygienists; and 238.32 FTEs for dental assistants.

Public Dental Health for the Disadvantaged

There has been remarkable progress and improvement in the reduction of dental caries in the United States over the past 50 years. The uses of fluoride in public water supplies, toothpaste, and professional dental products, as well as improvements in oral hygiene and increased access to dental care have played major roles in dramatically improving the incidence and severity of dental disease.

However, dental disease remains a significant problem for the 20% of the population that carries the majority of the dental disease. The U.S. Surgeon General's 2000 Report, Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General (Report) indicated that, despite the fact that safe and effective means of maintaining oral health have benefited the majority of Americans, many still experience needless pain and suffering. The Report explained that dental disease is a "silent epidemic" that is "affecting our most vulnerable citizens." The Report made it abundantly clear that there are "profound and consequential disparities" in the oral health of various disadvantaged populations that reside in the U.S. and Florida. The "disadvantaged" are those population groups that lack power and are without the knowledge or resources to achieve optimal dental care – such as poor children, the elderly, individuals with special health care needs, rural populations and many members of racial and ethnic minority groups.

State data has shown only about 20% of Medicaid-eligible persons receive any dental services from year to year. Florida Medicaid inpatient data indicated that from July 2006 to June 2007, there were 196 Medicaid children under the age of six who were hospitalized for an average of 3.7 days for sinus infections related to a dental problem. The total expenditures for these 196 admissions were a staggering \$1,076,229.28. Even more disturbing is the fact that nationally since 2007, there have been three deaths to Medicaid-eligible children; including one in Maryland (the Diamonte Driver case), one child in Mississippi and one child in the Bronx, New York. All three deaths were attributed to untreated dental infections and lack of access to dental care.

The question is, why are there disparities related to dental health? Disadvantaged groups tend to be isolated within society. They lack political power, they lack social power, and they lack economic power. Societal views that “dental diseases are not serious,” “dental diseases are inevitable,” and that “oral health is not important” compound the situation. Societal attitudes may cause a lack of urgency to act and a powerful rationale for inactivity among the public, policy makers and providers, all of which contribute to the disparities found among the disadvantaged and the need for public health interventions.

Public Dental Health’s Role and Fluoridation

The Public Health Dental Program has a public health role developing and supporting preventive and educational dental programs statewide and locally. The Program provides a state focus for the control and prevention of oral diseases and provides policy direction for oral health issues. Education and prevention are crucial to improving the dental health of all the people in Florida. Education and prevention can lessen dental disease and the need for clinical dental treatment services and can reduce the demand on the dental workforce. The Program develops and supports initiatives such as community water fluoridation; data collection; ECC prevention; integration of oral health into general health programs; workforce analysis and development; teledentistry; developing collaborations, and promoting oral health locally and statewide.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recognize community water fluoridation as one of the top ten great achievements in public health of the 20th century. Community water fluoridation is safe and effective in preventing tooth decay and may be the most studied process in the world. The Public Health Dental Program acts as the central support for community water fluoridation in Florida. It provides technical assistance, implements community water fluoridation for eligible communities and operates a fluoridation surveillance system. The Program provides minimal funding assistance (through a fluoridation grant) for the installation and upgrading of fluoridation systems, including start-up and chemical costs, and conducts monitoring of water systems for optimal fluoride levels.

Nationally in 2006, 69.2% of the U.S. population served by community water systems received optimally fluoridated water. In comparison, in 2007, 77.8% of Florida’s population served by community water systems received optimally fluoridated water. Despite its proven record, the battle with those opposed to community water fluoridation, often referred to as antifuoridationists continues. Everyone in the dental profession remains vigilant in this time of tight state and local budgets as local communities are looking for programs to cut.

Public Dental Health Collaborations

A primary focus of the Public Health Dental Program is collaboration. The Public Health Dental Program is committed to integrating dental health into other general health programs. As the U.S. Surgeon General stated in his 2000 Report, “oral health is essential to general health.” The Public Health Dental Program has coordinated initiatives with other health programs and providers to extend the reach of oral health education and preventive measures. The Program has initiatives that include providing oral health information, training and education in Minority health programs; Maternal & Child Health programs; Head Start; Healthy Start; tobacco programs; obesity and wellness programs; chronic disease programs such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer; and school and education programs. The Program also strives to work with all the major oral health stakeholders in Florida such as the FDA, the FDHA, and the dental schools.

The Physician’s Role

One of the Program’s collaborations has been with the University of Florida, College of Dentistry (UFCD). Through a federal grant, the Healthy Kids, Gators Smiles program trains physicians, physician assistants and ARNPs in oral health screening, risk assessment, anticipatory guidance, fluoride varnish application, and referral to a dental home. Physicians tend to see 0- to 3-year-old children more often than dentists for well-baby checkups during early childhood. The concept of the ECC prevention program is to provide high risk children aged 0 to 3 years with extensive dental health preventive treatments, in order to reduce the prevalence of ECC. The program is based on North Carolina’s “Into the Mouth of Babes” program and the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) oral health training program.

This past April Florida’s Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) authorized reimbursement of physicians, physician assistants, and ARNPs for these services. Providers may bill once every three months up to 42 months (3 ½ years). Dentists may still bill once every six months; the Agency for Healthcare Administration is considering a proposal to allow dentists to bill every three months. All dental procedures must occur in a medical office or clinic; not in mobile units or schools for Medicaid reimbursement.

Teledentistry

Another area where the Florida Department of Health is active is in investigating how technology can improve the delivery of health care services. Consequently, the Florida Department of Health has developed two Teledentistry pilot programs in Nassau and Wakulla Counties to determine if teledentistry can increase the Department’s reach in providing dental services to rural or other isolated populations (e.g. seniors in long-term care facilities or individuals with special health care needs in group homes). Teledentistry is a combination of telecommunications and dentistry that involves the exchange of clinical information and images over remote distances. Implementation of a teledental system can increase access to prevention and educational dental health care services, can improve access to primary care dental services, can widen the reach of specialty care dental services, and can expand the chance for utilization of dental education and training by health care professionals and community members. Both pilot

programs use real-time videoconferencing telehealth technology. The pilot programs utilize a dental hygienist in a remote site linked to a dentist in a hub site. The dentist provides a teledentistry examination and supervision so that dental hygienist can provide appropriate educational and preventive dental services. Patients in need of restorative or specialty care are given teledentistry consultations and a referral to an appropriate provider.

The State Oral Health Coalition – “Oral Health Florida”

A major undertaking of the Public Health Dental Program has been the development of a state oral health coalition - “Oral Health Florida” –, which has occurred with the assistance of federal grant dollars. The Coalition is a broad-based team of statewide stakeholders that began as about 50 participating organizations or individuals in 2004. Currently, the Coalition has grown to over 300 participating organizations and individuals. The Coalition includes such organizations as the Florida Dental Association; the Florida Dental Hygiene Association; the University of Florida College of Dentistry; Nova Southeastern University College of Dental Medicine; the Health Foundation of South Florida; the Florida Public Health Institute, numerous government agencies; and many other dental and non-dental agencies around the state. The Coalition produced a State Oral Health Plan in 2004 that is constantly being revised and implemented. The Coalition has spawned many county oral health coalitions that have developed their own local strategic oral health plans. Additionally, the Coalition has formed numerous workgroups to address specific populations or topics. These workgroups include Maternal and Child Oral Health; Special Needs; Senior Oral Health; Minority Oral Health; Migrant Farmworkers; Teledentistry and Technology; and Community Water Fluoridation. Details about Oral Health Florida can be found at: www.oralhealthflorida.com.

What Can Florida’s Private Dentists Do To Help?

Consider a career or position with the Department of Health or promote such positions to other practitioners. The Department provides:

- extensive benefits,
- sovereign immunity
- modern facilities and equipment,
- no overhead costs to providers, and
- schedules that can be both flexible (days per week) and fixed (8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and no weekend work).

Consider volunteering at a County Health Department, a Community Health Center or any other local safety net facility one day every week or two or provide volunteer, uncompensated dental services to underserved populations in your own office.

- **The Florida Department of Health’s Volunteer Health Care Provider Program**
The Volunteer Health Care Provider Program allows private licensed dentists and dental hygienists to volunteer their services to the medically indigent residents of Florida with incomes at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. Through contracting with the state, a dentist or dental hygienist can become an "agent of the state" and gain sovereign immunity for providing uncompensated dental services to eligible clients. Under this

program, providers have the option to volunteer in freestanding clinics or to see eligible clients in their private offices or corporate facilities. This program provides sovereign immunity, workers' compensation, and the opportunity to earn a biennial licensure fee waiver by providing substantial pro-bono care. (For more information see: 766.1555 F. S. and <http://www.doh.state.fl.us/tobacco/VHS/archive/Volunteer/index.html>)

- **The Florida Dental Association's Project: Dentists Care.**

Project: Dentists Care is a dental access to care program. Dentists and dental hygienists volunteer time and services to provide dental care to those in greatest need. Each PDC chapter has a coordinator who works within a local dental association's organizational structure. Volunteer dentists provide pro-bono or reduced fee dental care to eligible individuals. Many PDC chapters have opted to have their volunteers join the Florida Department of Health's Volunteer Health Care Provider Program. Additionally, Project: Dentists Care is a Board of Dentistry approved program which allows licensed dentists and dental hygienists an opportunity to earn CE credit for the provision of pro-bono dental care. (For more information see: <http://floridadental.org/pro/outreach/project.html>)

Donate equipment or supplies to a local safety net provider or the Florida Dental Association's Dental Equipment Clearinghouse (<http://floridadental.org/pro/outreach/clearinghouse.html>). Donating equipment may also qualify Donors for a charitable contribution deduction (please consult with a CPA regarding possible tax benefits).

Pursue continuing education and training opportunities that can impact care for disadvantaged populations such as individuals with special health care needs, geriatric populations or children – this includes behavioral therapy courses. You can contact the University of Florida College of Dentistry, Nova Southeastern College of Dental Medicine or the FDA about such opportunities. Additionally, Special Olympics has a program called Special Smiles where they train dentists to become local clinical directors for Special Olympics athletes. (For more information see: <http://www.specialolympicsflorida.org/content/view/28/66/>).

Join a local or state oral health coalition. Oral Health Florida welcomes a wide variety of stakeholders who are interested in working on access to care issues.

The ability to bring about statewide change starts with individual action.