



Access to Dental Care

Expanding access to dental care is a high priority for the California Dental Association. Overall, the state's population today has relatively good oral health, thanks to the spread of community water fluoridation, a healthy lifestyle and professional dentistry. But for those with limited incomes, or a limited understanding of the importance of oral health, access to care can be challenging. A milestone report on oral health by the U.S. Surgeon General in 2000 said those who suffer the greatest problems are the poor, with low-income children and seniors most at risk.

For those unable to access even basic dental care, the consequences can be dramatic. Studies have repeatedly documented connections between poor oral health and a variety of serious medical conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease. Other consequences of untreated decay include severe pain, infections, speech difficulties, tooth loss, missed work days and more. Among adults seeking jobs, those with visible dental problems are at a distinct disadvantage compared to those with healthy smiles.

Barriers to care include difficulty getting to a dental office, failure to prioritize dental care among other health needs, a shortage of providers in underserved areas, and, perhaps most significantly, financial hardship. Those Californians who qualify for assistance through the government's Medi-Cal program are sometimes unaware that dental benefits are included as part of their coverage. Or, they may have difficulty understanding the program requirements or may have language barriers.

Overlaying this picture is an enduring reality: government insurance programs providing dental coverage for low-income people are chronically under funded. Numerous dentists are willing to treat people through state public health programs. But the programs are so poorly funded that participating providers are reimbursed at rates so low that they are often unable to recoup even their overhead costs.

CDA is an advocate for improving access to dental care and strengthening the public health system that is designed to provide treatment to disadvantaged populations. Prevention and preventive treatments should be a priority and are an essential and effective part of good oral health. Dentists also provide pro bono care to needy patients through a variety of programs. But free care cannot be the solution to access to care problems. Nearly half of American adults have no form of dental insurance. Government leaders, insurance companies, consumer groups and public health professionals must unite to ensure that dental care is properly funded and available to the millions who do not receive it.



Access to Dental Care – Addendum

In addition to the efforts listed in our policy brief, CDA helps expand access to dental care through a variety of efforts managed by the CDA Foundation. These include:

- **POHAP – Pediatric Oral Health Access Program.** With funding help from other organizations, the CDA Foundation offers free training to dentists to increase their skill and comfort level in treating young children and those with special needs. More information is available at:
http://www.cdafoundation.org/learn/pediatric_oral_health_access_program
- **Student Loan Repayment Program.** The CDA Foundation provides grants to young dentists looking to make a difference in underserved communities. By paying off their school debt, the Foundation enables these dentists to serve in areas they would otherwise not be able to because of the financial strain of their student loan payments. More information is available at:
http://www.cdafoundation.org/access_to_care/student_loan_repayment_grant_program
- **CDA Foundation Grant Program.** This CDA Foundation effort provides financial support to a wide variety of community oral health projects, including community dental clinics and mobile dental services. More information is available at:
http://www.cdafoundation.org/access_to_care/cda_foundation_grant_program.