



The sad consequences of insufficient dental access

Written by: David Maywhoor, December 10, 2015

We often hear that much of the country is slowly digging its way out of the Great Recession which devastated many of the working folks in our communities. The economic gains have bypassed many parts of Ohio including right here in Clermont County where US Census Bureau statistics gathered between 2009 and 2013 show that 10 percent of our neighbors live in poverty.

But, there is some good news in recently released data from the 2015 Ohio Medicaid Assessment Survey (OMAS) which showed that more low-income Ohioans are reporting that it is easier to get health care than three years ago.

Unfortunately, the same is not true for access to oral health care. The survey shows that 14 percent of adults, ages 19-64, live with and suffer from dental care needs. For one in four low-income adults, access to oral health care is their largest unmet health care need.

Overall, access to dental care is worse in Ohio's economically battered Appalachian counties. These are the areas that are most likely to be one of Ohio's 84 dental health professional shortage areas, where there just aren't enough dentists to meet the needs of the folks who live there.

For low-income Ohioans, insurance coverage is a big predictor of access to care. Nearly 41 percent of low-income adults who lack insurance have dental problems that go without care. Twenty-three percent of people with Medicaid coverage still could not get desperately needed dental services. That is because less than 16 percent of Ohio's dentists will serve any significant number of Medicaid patients. Whether due to a dentist shortage or the inability to find a dentist who takes Medicaid or uninsured patients, too many Ohioans do not have the access to the care they need.

The consequences of the lack of routine dental care are seen in many places and many ways in our communities. We know that oral health care is directly related to overall health, economic security and upward social mobility whereas a lack of proper dental care can increase the risk of diabetes and the potential of a stroke. There have been cases where desperately needed medical procedures such as heart surgery had to be delayed until the patient could get their dental issues resolved. We have heard from consumers that their primary care physician delayed needed surgery because the patient had an abscessed tooth and the physician was concerned about the infection impacting the surgery. Tragically lack of available and affordable dental care resulted in at least one death in Southwestern Ohio directly attributable to an untreated abscessed tooth.



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Recently a Pennsylvania State study was released which suggests rural youth have less access to healthcare, pushing them to emergency rooms for treatment where they are more likely to receive pain pills. Unfortunately this method of dealing with dental pain can also lead to addiction to pain killers, a pervasive problem that is already ravaging our region and destroying countless lives.

We can no longer count on approaches which are leaving our most vulnerable without dental care. We need to modernize our dental workforce. One part of the solution is the regulated inclusion of the Dental Therapists which will help more Ohioans get the dental care they desperately need. Working as part of a dentist-led team, these specially trained practitioners provide preventive and routine care. A recent study showed that Dental Therapists in Minnesota expand access to care for hard to reach populations just like areas of this county and our region.

Ohio needs to examine the expansion of our dental workforce to include Dental Therapists so that our populations in peril can obtain and utilize dental services that will allow them the health, the improved appearance and the economic benefits that will enrich the future of every community where they reside. Our Buckeye citizens deserve nothing less.

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