

DTA Supports Comprehensive Dental Benefit in the Medicare Program

Position

The Dental Trade Alliance (DTA) believes a comprehensive oral health benefit is needed within the Medicare program to address the linkage between oral health and chronic health conditions. As such, the DTA supports the oral health provisions of Section 601 of H.R.3, which was passed by the House of Representatives on December 12, 2019. DTA urges the Senate to consider inclusion of Section 603 in any health policy legislation it considers during the remainder of the 116th Congress.

DTA is also a strong supporter of the Medicare Dental Benefit Act (H.R.2951/S.22) introduced by Representative Nanette Barragan (D-CA) in the House and Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) in the Senate. DTA urges members to cosponsor this legislation which is the basis for the oral health provisions within H.R.3.

Background

The oral health provisions of Section 601 of H.R.3 would provide coverage for preventive and screening services such as oral exams, dental cleanings, dental x-rays, and fluoride treatments. It would also cover basic and major treatments to include basic tooth restorations, basic periodontic services, tooth extractions, oral disease management services, major tooth restorations, major periodontic services, bridges, crowns, dental implants, and root canals. Dentures would also be covered with special limitations. Preventive and screening services would be paid under a fee schedule and Medicare would cover 80 percent of the cost. Medicare would pay 10 percent of major treatments starting in 2022 with this percentage increasing to 50 percent by 2026. Oral exams and dental cleanings would be limited to 2 per year.

“Oral health conditions—like untreated cavities, gum disease, and tooth loss—are not inevitable consequences of aging. Access to adequate dental care among older adults can prevent or delay these problems and may lead to overall improvements in health and well-being among seniors.

A robust body of literature—including a seminal report by the U.S. Surgeon General—finds a clear connection between oral health and physical health, including health conditions that are prevalent among older adults—like diabetes and heart disease. Yet,

many older adults go without the care they need to maintain healthy teeth and gums. Despite this evidence, Medicare does not cover commonly needed oral health procedures.”

- “Something to Chew On: Highlights of Findings from an AARP Oral Health Survey of Older Americans.” Posted By Lynda Flowers, Olivia Dean and Teresa Keenan from AARP On April 12, 2019.

The AARP survey found that despite clear evidence that oral health care is beneficial for older adults, they simply can’t afford it. Over half of respondents (**55 percent**) reported not having any dental coverage, and more than a third (**36 percent**) were somewhat to extremely concerned about being able to pay their dental bills in next 12 months. Among those who delayed or did not get dental care, half (**52 percent**) cited cost reasons and a third (**34 percent**) cited lack of insurance.

Older adults have high rates of untreated cavities and periodontal disease, which negatively affect oral and overall health: more than 14% of older adults have untreated cavities and about 2 in 3 (68%) have periodontal disease. If left untreated, caries and periodontal disease can lead to infections, abscesses, tooth loss, and chronic pain. Many older adults report having frequent painful aching in their mouths, with 15% having painful aching at least occasionally.

“Untreated oral health problems can lead to serious health complications. Having no natural teeth can cause nutritional deficiencies and related health problems. Untreated caries (cavities) and periodontal (gum) disease can exacerbate certain diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and lead to chronic pain, infections, and loss of teeth. Lack of routine dental care can also delay diagnosis of conditions, which can lead to potentially preventable complications, high-cost emergency department visits, and adverse outcomes.”

- “Drilling Down on Dental Coverage and Costs for Medicare Beneficiaries,” Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation, March 2019 Issue Brief, page 1.

The Dental Trade Alliance (DTA) is an association of companies that provide dental equipment, supplies, materials and services to dentists and other oral care professionals. Our member companies are distributors, dental laboratories and manufacturers, located in the United States, Canada and Mexico. By providing the best equipment, materials and services to dentists and oral care professionals, we are partners in improving the oral health of everyone.

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