

DTA Calls for Comprehensive Dental Benefit in the Medicare Program

Position

The Dental Trade Alliance believes a comprehensive dental benefit is needed within the Medicare program to address the linkage between oral health and chronic health conditions.

The DTA urges Congress to support the Medicare Dental Benefit Act of 2019 (S.22) introduced by Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD).

Background

"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.*

If one agrees with these basic statements of fact regarding access to oral health care services from the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) report, it remains a clear deficiency of the Medicare program that no oral health benefit exists for millions of seniors and individuals with disabilities. Today almost two-thirds of Medicare beneficiaries, or nearly 37 million people, do not have dental coverage. Almost half of all Medicare beneficiaries did not have a dental visit within the past year (49%), with higher rates among those who are black (71%) or Hispanic (65%) as of 2016.

Numerous studies in the KFF report confirm the direct connection between oral health and overall health. Periodontal disease, or advanced gum disease, is associated with increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, coronary heart disease, and stroke, increased risk of mortality for those with chronic kidney disease, increased risk of cancer, and poor glycemic control of diabetes.

Poor oral health is associated with potentially preventable and costly emergency department (ED) visits, with more than 2 million visits to the ED each year among people of all ages due to oral health complications.

The KFF report finds that the vast majority (89%) of beneficiaries who received dental services paid for some of their care out-of-pocket. Across all beneficiaries, average out-of-pocket spending on dental care was \$469 in 2016, and among those who used any dental services, average out-of-pocket spending on dental care was \$922. Almost one-fifth of beneficiaries who used dental services (19%) spent more than \$1,000 out-of-pocket on dental care. With half of Medicare beneficiaries living on less than \$26,200 per year, this is a significant portion of their incomes.

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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