Oral Health Opportunities for Health Plans and Foundations

Oral Health Is Essential for Children’s Healthy Development

Oral health is an important indicator of general health, and since oral health behaviors are established during early childhood, oral health status during childhood often predicts adult oral health status. Poor oral health has been linked to a variety of health conditions including diabetes, heart disease, stroke and low-birth weight. Poor oral health in children has been linked to greater school absenteeism and decreased academic performance, as well as problems with speech, nutrition, growth, social development and quality of life. Unfortunately, early childhood caries is the most prevalent chronic disease that affects children in the United States today, and oral health continues to be the most prevalent unmet health care need.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) provides many opportunities for health plans and foundations to improve children’s oral health, including the requirement that all qualified health plans offered through state health insurance exchanges provide coverage for children’s oral health care. The ACA also authorizes federally funded school-based health centers to offer referrals and follow-up care for oral health services, and it includes numerous loan and incentive programs for aspiring and practicing dentists. While the ACA includes provisions to improve the oral health of children and other vulnerable populations, it is currently unknown which unfunded provisions of the ACA will be implemented and to what extent. The Institute of Medicine (IOM)’s recently released report Improving Access to Oral Health Care for Vulnerable and Underserved Populations identifies provisions of the ACA that may positively impact the nation’s oral health and analyzes barriers to oral health care for the nation’s most vulnerable populations, including children. The IOM report proposes strategies for improving oral health in the U.S that can be employed throughout all health care sectors, including health plans and foundations. The report stresses that organizations from every sector must work together in order to make real and lasting change for our nation’s oral health.

Institute of Medicine (IOM) Report – Implications for Foundations and Health Plans

The IOM’s 2011 report Improving Access to Oral Health Care for Vulnerable and Underserved Populations describes how philanthropic foundations can play an active role in increasing access to oral health care for children. Examples of ways that health plan foundations can improve access to oral care for their communities include:

• Raising awareness about the importance of children’s oral health;
• Promoting policies that support all children’s access to oral health providers;
• Establishing a children’s dental health campaign;
• Creating incentives to increase the time that dental students spend in low income community settings;
• Funding oral health research related to pregnant women, children and adolescents;
• Funding expansions or evaluations of existing oral health programs; and
• Creating or participating in a coalition of stakeholders to create a state or community plan that addresses oral health initiatives.

The IOM also recognizes that health plans are essential stakeholders in children's oral health. Health plans can ensure their network of dental providers is adequate to meet the needs of their members and can encourage enrollees to see a dentist at recommended intervals. As an example of how health plans can work to increase access to oral health care for their members, the IOM report highlights the efforts of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (BCBSMA). BCBSMA members with both medical and oral health coverage and who have certain medical conditions (diabetes, coronary artery disease, oral cancer and pregnancy) are automatically enrolled in a program that provides enhanced dental benefits. They are then eligible to receive additional oral health services as needed at no additional cost. The aim of this program is to improve overall health outcomes by removing cost barriers to oral health care among vulnerable members. Research indicates that a woman’s oral health during pregnancy directly impacts the health of her newborn, therefore this program has the potential to benefit the newborns of those mothers enrolled. The BCBSMA program can be used as a model for other plans in creating similar programs for vulnerable members.

Resources for Oral Health Information

American Dental Association

The American Dental Association (ADA) represents over 157,000 dentists from across the country. The ADA provides resources for its members including one of the largest dental libraries in the world, opportunities for continuing education, as well as resources for the public, such as a guide to buying the proper dental products and finding the right dentist. The ADA Foundation is the ADA’s philanthropic arm, which awards grants to dental students and community organizations dedicated to improving the oral health of their communities.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Human Capital Blog

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) hosts a blog where scholars and health care leaders author posts on a range of health care issues. The Human Capital blog recently addressed the IOM’s oral health care report in a post that includes perspectives from dentists and community health care leaders from around the country. The fourth post, in the series of five, directly addresses children’s oral health.
The American Academy of Pediatrics Children’s Oral Health Website

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recently released a new website called Children’s Oral Health, which provides resources, tips and research about children’s oral health. The website contains resources for dentists as well as pediatricians, citing the fact that many children lack access to traditional dentists and that those children can be well served by a pediatrician who has a thorough understanding of child and adolescent dental health care needs. The website also provides resources for the public, including tips for parents and links to other organizations that are dedicated to improving children’s oral health.


Georgetown University maintains the Maternal and Child Library to provide physicians, policymakers, students, families and health professionals with accurate and timely information from across the MCH spectrum. The Maternal and Child Health Library has a section devoted entirely to oral health, which includes current research and data and information on effective programs in oral health.

Children’s Dental Health Project

The Children’s Dental Health Project (CDHP) recognizes that children’s oral health is a crucial aspect of their overall health and works to promote solutions that are grounded in the best available research. Engaging policymakers and other decision-makers in addressing the ongoing inequities in children’s oral health, CDHP’s work has resulted in development of critical legislation that supports the prevention of childhood tooth decay and increases the dental workforce. It has been influential in congressional investigations and recommendations for advocate and policymakers across the country. CDHP provides research briefs, newsletters and other resources for advocates, policymakers and decision-makers.

Pew Center On The States: Children’s Dental Health Campaign

The Pew Children’s Dental Campaign works to improve children’s oral health throughout the United States by advocating for the expansion of Medicaid sealant programs for children who need them most. The Dental Campaign also promotes expanding availability of optimally fluoridated water and increasing the number of professionals who can provide dental care to low-income children.

3 Ibid.

