

Tackling hidden epidemic in kids

Teachers, pediatricians, child-care professionals — anyone who sees lots of low-income kids — will know some like this one. It's the

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shy boy who doesn't smile or talk much, or the girl who never seems interested in lunch or snacks.

Maybe it's the child who's tired in class. Most likely, it's all of the above. And most likely, that child is suffering from a painful and entirely preventable disease hidden in his or her mouth. For hundreds of thousands of California children, untreated dental disease is making it hard to smile, chew, sleep and learn. These children don't realize their mouths aren't supposed to hurt.

Sadly, this story illustrates a major health disparity between impoverished Californians and the rest of the state. A recent California Healthcare Foundation study reported that most California children with untreated dental disease are under 5, uninsured and from low-income, ethnic minority families. Nationwide, children ages 5-17 miss two million school days each year. By third grade, two-thirds of California children have some level of tooth decay, and 28 percent — 750,000 — go untreated.

How did we get to this point? In Santa Cruz County, like many parts of California, children don't have access to fluoridated water — a well-established global public health intervention that has prevented dental decay for generations. The lack of fluoride

might not be so devastating to children if their parents practiced and taught them good dental health habits, like brushing with fluoride toothpaste. But in low-income families, especially when parents don't speak English, dental health knowledge is scarce. These families also are less likely to have dental insurance.

February is National Children's Dental Health Month, but that's not the only reason these oral health statistics are on our radar. Dental disease is by far the most chronic childhood disease in the United States — five times more common than asthma — and has joined obesity as a major threat to a healthy childhood. If a child's (or adult's) mouth is unhealthy, overall health is compromised by pain, infection and nutrition problems, not to mention the effects of sleep deprivation, difficulty concentrating and missed school and work days. Dental disease also is linked to higher risk for pre-term births, heart disease, stroke and diabetes. And dentists offer the best chance for early detection of oral cancer, HIV and other diseases.

Our local county-wide collaborative of health, foundation, government and community leaders — the Health Improvement Partnership (HIP) — is working hard to change the factors leading to so much unnecessary pain and suffering. Our recommendations echo those of other state and national groups:

■ **Fluoridate our water.** It's simple, effective and cheap. Lack of fluoridated water is one reason why California, in a 25-state study, outranked only one other state in children's dental health: Arkansas.

■ **Make it easier for low-income and low-English families to see a dentist** by preserving Medi-Cal's dental insurance coverage and providing services in culturally appropriate ways (for example, through an interpreter or with bilingual staff).

Our county is fortunate to have several low-cost, high-quality dental care providers serving this population with skill and compassion. Dientes Community Dental Care and Salud Para La Gente offer a range of services on a sliding fee scale or with public insurance. These clinics, though, depend on adult Medi-Cal reimbursements to stay afloat. Current budget cuts are threatening these payments, which, in turn, will jeopardize the long-term health of these clinics for adults and children.

■ **Make children's oral health the business of all providers, not just dentists.** Pediatricians, prenatal care providers and other professionals who interact with low-income children and their parents can help educate parents about the importance of oral health, teach good oral health habits that last a lifetime, and refer patients to eligibility screening for health and dental insurance.

HIP's members hope that next February, we'll be celebrating National Children's Dental Health Month by making Santa Cruz County a model for treating this hidden, costly and entirely preventable epidemic.

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