

# METRO

## Alarm grows on kids' dental health

Recent Medi-Cal cuts will make the problem worse, officials warn.

By Jane Liaw  
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As a pediatric dentist, Dr. James Musser sees many cautionary tales.

In his 26 years of practice in Sacramento County, Musser has on occasion placed stainless steel crowns on all of a young patient's rotted baby teeth. Sometimes these tiny teeth are so decayed they are unsalvageable, and he must remove them all.

"Parents think they get a free ride on the first set," Musser said. "But baby teeth can decay and abscess, and the child can go through severe pain."

Musser sees some of the most serious cases in the county because he is one of the few pediatric specialists able to administer the general anesthesia that many of the patients referred to him require during treatment.

Tooth decay is children's worst chronic health problem, a "hidden epidemic," according to the Dental Health Foundation's 2006 "California Smile Survey."

And dental health officials say the problem will only get worse with a 10 percent cut to Medi-Cal that took effect statewide Tuesday as part of the state's effort to deal with the state budget deficit.

In Sacramento, Yolo, Amador, El Dorado and Placer counties, about 65 percent of children living in poverty do not have adequate access to dental care, according to the Sacramento District Dental Foundation. Statewide studies have shown that poor access is the result of lack of insurance and a limited number of dentists providing care for uninsured or underinsured patients.

Across California, children have more dental problems than children in most other states, according to the Smile Survey.

More than half of all Californians  
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# Teeth: Prevention is crucial; often, it's first to go

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nia children have experienced tooth decay by kindergarten. Almost one in five have extensive decay, the study shows. As with many other health conditions, poor and minority children have a disproportionately high number of cavities and poor oral health.

Latino children have the highest risk for dental problems, according to the survey. Among Latinos, 72 percent have experienced decay and 26 percent had cavities on seven or more teeth.

"All things are not equal," said Gayle Mathe, manager of policy development for the California Dental Association. "Eighty percent of disease is in 25 percent of children."

Untreated tooth decay can lead to infections in other parts of the body, such as children's ears and sinuses, as pathogens spread from their teeth. Dental problems also cause children to miss many days of school, according to the Dental Health Foundation.

And dental disease is infectious: Cavity-causing bacteria can be passed from person to person, according to experts.

Dental diseases can be greatly reduced through good prevention practice such as regular dental visits, experts say, but those



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**Dr. Megan Mayneur works on Desmond Davis, 9, at the Native American Health Center in Sacramento, which serves poor children. About 4,000 of California's 34,000 dentists are said to offer 97% of such care.**

are precisely the practices that are sacrificed first when treatment is beyond the means of low-income parents.

Smiles for Kids provides dental screening and treatment to children in Sacramento, Yolo, Ama-

ador, El Dorado and Placer county whose families don't qualify for Medi-Cal or other public assistance, or who are waiting for other coverage to kick in.

A program of the Sacramento District Dental Society, Smiles for

Kids relies on grants, donations from the public and health care providers who donate their time.

"With all the Medi-Cal and Denti-Cal cuts, it's entirely possible we'll need to treat more kids," said Erin Jones, Smiles for Kids

## IT'S THE LAW

In 2006, California passed Assembly Bill 1433, requiring children to have a dental checkup by May 31 of their first year in public school.

Information about the requirement and forms for being excused from it can be obtained at the child's school or online at [www.cda.org/advocacy\\_and\\_the\\_law](http://www.cda.org/advocacy_and_the_law).

Information is available in Chinese, Hmong, Russian, Spanish and Vietnamese.

- The Sacramento District Dental Society's Smiles for Kids program serves children in Sacramento, Yolo, Amador, El Dorado and Placer counties who do not have private or government coverage. For information, call **(916) 446-1211**.

taking their children to the dentist. About 23 percent of parents reported having no insurance, 42 percent had some sort of government coverage, leaving about 35 percent with private insurance.

Those who rely on Medi-Cal will face more difficulties in the future getting their children the dental care they need.

Denti-Cal, as the dental portion of Medi-Cal is known, covers 6.6 million adults and children in California. It uses only 2 percent of the entire Medi-Cal budget, according to the Dental Health Foundation. The budget cuts to Medi-Cal mean Denti-Cal providers will also take a 10 percent cut in reimbursements.

Even before the cuts, Denti-Cal reimbursed well under 40 percent of what dentists are generally paid, said Musser. He says he fears that the budget cuts will result in fewer and fewer dentists accepting such patients.

About 4,000 of the state's 34,000 active dentists provide 97 percent of all services to Denti-Cal patients, according to the Dental Health Foundation.

"I can see real shock waves going out," said Musser. "How can I say it won't affect the patients I see?"

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Call *The Bee's* Jane Liaw, (916) 321-1074.

coordinator. "It'll have an impact on the number of kids that don't have options."

Lack of dental insurance or not being able to afford dental care was the main reason parents gave to the Smile Survey for not

A short digest item on United Way activities led to a conversation with one of the organization's experts on children's health. I asked him what the most pressing concerns regarding children were, and was surprised when he said number one was poor oral health. I had never heard that in my years working in public health and I was sure most readers wouldn't know about this "hidden epidemic" either.

In reporting this story, I learned some disturbing facts that have stuck with me: more than half of California children experience tooth decay by kindergarten. Cavities cause chronic pain to many of these children, and dental problems are a leading cause of school absenteeism. The positive response I got after my story was published—from readers and from dental care professionals—was gratifying. So was the knowledge I had helped, in a tiny way, bring to light a problem that rarely gets public attention.

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