

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: California Lagging in Percentage of Children Who Receive Regular Dental Screenings, Care

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I'm Kenny Goldberg, with a look at the low number of children who receive dental services in California.

This is a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation.

It's not unusual for pediatric dentist Parvathi Pokala to see preschoolers with extensive tooth decay.

(Pokala): "Had a kid today, has 20 baby teeth, had 14 teeth that needed to be filled. And that's quite typical."

Pokala treats kids at Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego. The patients she sees are too young to sit still in a dentist's chair for any length of time. So they have to get their teeth fixed in the hospital under general anesthesia.

Pokala says that's not cheap.

(Pokala): "The anesthesia, the operating room and the post-anesthesia recovery room involve multiple people: nurses, physicians taking care of these children, for a disease that's totally preventable."

The U.S. Surgeon General says tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease. Left untreated, it can cause severe pain, tooth loss and even speech problems.

California's dentist-to-population ratio is higher than the national average. Yet CMS says the state has one of the nation's lowest rates of kids who receive dental care. In 2008, only 33.4% of California kids age 18 and under received any dental services.

Lindsey Robinson is a pediatric dentist in Grass Valley, and president of the California Dental Association.

(Robinson): "I think part of it is just the lack of awareness on the part of parents that oral health is important. Also, there is a lack of awareness among the provider community. In many cases, general

dentists won't see children before the age of three, although things are changing."

California law requires children who are entering kindergarten to get an oral health assessment. Robinson says that law is helping to increase the percentage of five- and six-year-olds who are getting dental care.

Still, dentists recommend that kids have their initial oral health visit by their first birthday.

That's where California's approximately 700 pediatric dentists come in.

Jim Crall is a former chair of pediatric dentistry at UCLA Dental School. He currently heads up the school's division of public health and community dentistry.

Crall says there's a lot of interest among dental students in treating children.

(Crall): "The number of training slots that we have across the country has at least doubled over the last 10 to 12 years. And that was largely through a concerted effort of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry working with people in Congress, to get some federal funding to either start new training programs, or to expand existing programs."

Crall says it's heartening that more pediatric dentists will be getting into the business. That couldn't come at a more crucial time for California.

With the elimination of Healthy Families -- California's Children's Health Insurance Program -- and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, California is expected to add more than one million additional kids to Medi-Cal by 2014. That means next year, a total of nearly five million children will be covered by Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program.

(Crall): "So, having more dentists is a good thing, having more coverage for children can be a good thing, but only if the coverage and the programs attract enough providers to be able to have true access to care."

And there's the rub. Because of low reimbursement rates, less than one out of three California dentists in private practice treat Medi-Cal beneficiaries.

Paul Reggiardo, who has a pediatric dental practice in Huntington Beach, says Medi-Cal payments are insultingly low. For example, the program reimburses \$30 for a cleaning and \$15 for a normal exam.

(Reggiardo): "For each child that I'm seeing, I'm taking money out of my pocket. The fees that we receive from Medi-Cal, the maximum table of allowances, do not cover our overhead."

To make matters worse, the state plans to cut Medi-Cal provider rates by an additional 10%.

Reggiardo says the state appears to be counting on dentists' generosity to treat the large influx of Medi-Cal patients. He thinks that's dangerous.

(Reggiardo): "Generosity is not a system of health care. And so to rely on hoping enough dentists are willing to treat more patients -- for which they're being reimbursed at a level that does not meet their overhead -- is not a realistic way of providing care. It's not a safety net."

Paying dentists more could certainly help children with Medi-Cal get better access to dental care. But according to the California Dental Association, only 55% of California kids with private dental insurance get care every year.

Parvathi Pokala, who's been in practice for more than three decades, says regular dental care just doesn't seem to be a priority for people.

(Pokala): "In my 31 years, I have seen no reduction in the amount of tooth decay in children. To me, it's so sad."

This has been a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation.

If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Kenny Goldberg. Thanks for listening.