

WATCH YOUR MOUTH

Our Common Health: Continuing a Legacy of Leadership

Massachusetts has long been recognized as a leader in promoting public health. We had the nation's first health department and none other than Paul Revere was Boston's first public health officer.

The midnight rider would be proud of a new effort to educate the public about what has recently been termed the most neglected part of the body: the mouth. Health care professionals across the Commonwealth have come together to help the citizens of Massachusetts understand the vital importance of oral health. Their leadership is a response to an accumulating body of scientific evidence showing that oral health is essential to overall health.

The Watch Your Mouth coalition's efforts are focused on ensuring healthier futures for our children. This is because dental decay is now the most common chronic childhood disease in America, five times more common than asthma. This disease is caused by a bacterial infection in the mouth. Left untreated, it can lead to life-long health problems, from respiratory disease, to heart disease to diabetes.

Over the course of a century, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health became the finest in the nation. Unfortunately, during the past five years, the Department has been destabilized by a series of poorly conceived budget cuts. These have undermined the ability of health care professionals to develop and coordinate community-based solutions, especially for our children. Bit by bit, we have been leaving many communities—and many children—without access to essential treatment and care.

It's time to reverse this trend. This can be done quite easily if we restore the crucial infrastructure to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. To slow the incidence of dental decay we must work together to ensure that public health programs provide access for children to school- and community-based dental clinics. These programs deliver important preventive services such as oral screenings, dental sealants that cover and protect the teeth from disease, and fluoride treatments that make tooth enamel stronger and more resistant to decay.

The truth is that nearly 90% of dental disease can be prevented. If our state is to remain in the vanguard of public health, we must commit to repairing the gaps in the system that supports the oral health of its citizens. Just as Paul Revere and his comrades protected Boston from imminent threat, we need to protect the unguarded gate of the human body: the mouth.

So let's open our own mouths and ask our elected leaders to support the kinds of community programs and policies that connect the mouth to the rest of the body. Let's preserve the Commonwealth's historic public health legacy by taking good care of its future.

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www.WatchYourMouth.org
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