

# WATCH YOUR MOUTH

## The Unguarded Gate in the Healthcare Debate

Last April, Massachusetts demonstrated bold leadership when it enacted landmark legislation to transform the state's healthcare system. As the state and its partners continue to refine the law and its provisions, it is critical that our leadership recognize one important—and often overlooked—aspect of overall health: oral health.

The U.S. Surgeon General's report on oral health identified the mouth as an early warning system, signaling trouble in other parts of the body. Like the children's song about the bones in the human body being connected to one another, oral health is inextricably linked to overall health. In fact, dental 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.

Fortunately, a coalition of health professionals in the Commonwealth are working together to put the mouth back in the body and improve oral health statewide. This is particularly important for the children in our state. Dental decay is now the most common chronic childhood disease, five times more common than asthma. In Massachusetts, nearly half of all children have experienced tooth decay by the time they reach third grade. These children have trouble eating, speaking and paying attention in class. Nationally, 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental disease.

The solutions to these problems are well within our grasp. The majority of dental decay is preventable when children have access to protective measures such as regular screenings, dental sealants (thin plastic coatings applied to molar teeth) and fluoride treatments. Insurance plays a big role in prevention, as well. Children with dental insurance are 2.5 times more likely to receive routine and preventive care than their uninsured peers. For those who have it, dental benefits have been extremely successful in promoting oral health and overall health. Further, the cost savings can be significant: routine examinations and cleanings average \$75 and up, while a root canal, one of the most common oral surgeries, can approach \$1,000. By seeing to it that ALL children in Massachusetts have dental coverage, we stand to realize significant health and financial gains now and in the future.

To remain in the vanguard of healthcare reform, Massachusetts must commit to supporting the oral health of all of our citizens, especially our children. The irony remains that, by and large, our health care system continues to separate dental insurance from regular health insurance. Massachusetts has an opportunity to set an example by ensuring that a dental benefit is offered to everyone covered by Commonwealth Care and the Commonwealth Choice healthcare plans.

If the mouth is the unguarded gate to the body, then comprehensive dental insurance is one of the key ingredients in building a true health coverage infrastructure. Through its committed leadership, Massachusetts is demonstrating that the healthcare system works best when all citizens can become a part of it. Let's now make sure that every part of the body, including the mouth, is covered.

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