

DENTAL COVERAGE FOR CONNECTICUT'S POOR

Fred Thal, DDS and Bruce Fletcher, DMD

Governor Rell's recognition late last year that something must be done about medical care for the growing ranks of Connecticut's uninsured is welcome. For too long government leaders have been at best reluctant to address this issue in any meaningful way. The Governor's December 27 proposal, which seeks to provide a mechanism for healthy young adults to purchase basic health insurance at a reasonable cost (\$3000 per year) falls way short of providing access to health care for others. And it neglects to include any provision for improving access to dental care for the uninsured, underinsured, and HUSKY insured.

The quiet crisis of health care in our state is well illustrated by the status of dental care to Connecticut's children. In 2005, of the close to 300,000 children from lower income homes covered by the state's HUSKY (Medicaid) program, fewer than one-third of them received any dental services whatsoever. This compares with 65 to 70 percent of children covered by private insurance plans who do receive dental services during their critical formative years. Does anyone believe that the hundreds of thousands of young people thus deprived will not suffer from that dental neglect throughout their lives?

As Connecticut dentists, we are not only appalled by the situation but we have been frustrated in our attempts to remedy it. For years dentists and patient advocates have appealed to the Department of Social Services and the legislature to increase fees to a level which will enable dentists to provide care. Medicaid reimbursement for the HUSKY program lags far below the true cost of providing service. As a result, only 15 percent of the state's dentists serve the entire HUSKY population. A longstanding class action lawsuit accuses the State of failing to provide access to dental care for its HUSKY insured children. If it succeeds, and the true cost of service is recognized, many more dentists will be able to help fill the service gap.

In the meantime, more and more of our young will lack the oral care they need.

Hundreds of compassionate dentists and dental hygienists donate their time to provide free services to needy adults and children through such volunteer programs as Give Kids A Smile Day, Mission of Mercy, and Dentistry With A Heart; not to mention the free and discounted care they provide on a daily basis in their offices. They are supported quietly by dental supply houses, foundations, charitable organizations and community groups such as local dental societies, The Connecticut Health Foundation, The Community Foundation of Greater New Britain, and others. The total value of free care and donated goods in 2006 was huge, but charity for a relatively small number of patients doesn't meet the need.

The Senate Democrats, on January 25, 2007, unveiled their Connecticut Health First Initiative. Among other measures, the plan expands state programs such as Medicaid, HUSKY for parents and children and State-Administered General Assistance so that more people are eligible for health insurance. It also expands access for those already qualified for these programs by substantially increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for doctors, hospitals, dentists and other health providers.

Providing adequate medical—including dental—care to the residents of our state least able to afford it is a societal issue and has to be addressed by state government and legislators, who were elected to represent all of us, including the poor. Governor Rell's initiative, however lacking, at least recognizes the problem, but the Senate Democrats' Health First Initiative actually holds promise to expand health care to a large percentage of those who are currently without it.

As one of the richest states in the union, Connecticut should be leading the way and giving those at the bottom of the ladder some hope, and reason to smile.