

Testimony to the Human Services Committee

Senate Bill No. 843 - An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget
Recommendations Concerning Social Services

March 3, 2009

Senator Doyle, Representative Walker and Committee Members,

Once again we have a Republican Governor who thinks cutting dental benefits will save the State money. Once again we have to launch a campaign to enlighten our Government as to the value of dental treatment and oral health. At the risk of sounding repetitious, let's review.

The fees that dentists receive are so low for adults in Medicaid that most dentists won't touch them. These fees are so low that you can do ten check-ups for the price of one emergency room visit where the patient will only receive a prescription for pain meds and an antibiotic which will only provide, if lucky, a few days of relief. When the pills run out, the pain and infection come back, and now the bacteria may be immune to the first round of cheaper antibiotics, causing further expense as the patient goes back for more expensive meds, and still does not receive treatment or a proper exam and diagnosis. This goes on and on as the dollars pile up in a never ending cycle. The fees in dentistry are so low that for the price of one ER visit, the patient could have had an extraction, or a root canal treatment, and several other restorations, leaving them in a state of oral health. An ounce of prevention is worth a TON of cure!

With dental care, the patient and the State win. Without dental care, the patient may end up being admitted for extensive oral/facial surgery that costs tens of thousands of dollars. Hundreds of patients can be cared for with those dollars. Without treatment, as we've seen in Maryland and around the country, people die. I haven't even mentioned early detection of oral cancer and tumors. I myself recently diagnosed someone who didn't even know they had Leukemia! While death is a rare outcome, pain and morbidity are not. Without treatment adults will lose their jobs because they are too ill to work, or spending too much time in the hospital or at home dealing with side effects from their meds, such as sleepiness, nausea, vomiting, headaches, or allergic reactions. Without treatment, patients can't get decent jobs because they look awful when they smile. Without treatment, adults find it difficult to care for their kids because they are debilitated. Without dental care, unemployment goes up, and tax revenue goes down.

Dental care is not a luxury when it comes to Medicaid for adults. We are not doing porcelain veneers, bleaching, and other expensive cosmetic treatments. We are saving teeth, ending pain, ending and preventing infections and the transmission of germs, and restoring the ability to chew effectively. Often, we are restoring self-respect and dignity. We are allowing people to rejoin society and become productive citizens. Most people don't like to come to the dentist. Most of the patients we see come to us because of great need. They can't eat (which is devastating to diabetics and the elderly or immune-compromised). They can't sleep. They can't talk. They can't get a job. Their medical health is worsening. They can't stop the pain. They are overdosing on OTC meds which will give them liver, kidney, or bleeding problems. They are desperate. They have no money. They can't get into the community clinics because there's a three month wait for an appointment. **THEY NEED DENTAL CARE!** It's not a luxury or a convenience. It's health care. It pays for itself. It's the right and humane thing to do. To end the program is foolish and short-sighted. It would backfire completely. That's why the legislature always comes to the rescue in the end. The common sense of the issue always manifests itself in the end.

Sincerely,

Peter Munk, DDS, FAGD