

# Oral Health Promotion: An Unexpected Way to Reduce Healthcare Costs

By: Rhoda Gonzales, RDHAP

*One of the biggest problems in health care is we pay for the treatment of illness but we don't pay for the advancement of health.*

~ Diana Dooley, former Secretary of the California State Health & Human Services Agency

National surveys show that dental caries is the most preventable childhood disease. In the past 20 years, some populations have actually seen an increase in caries experience.<sup>11</sup> In a 2011-12 National Survey of Children's Health, parents ranked California in the bottom 4th of all states on the condition of their child's teeth. Data from the California Dept. of Public Health (CDPH), based on the last needs assessment in 2004-2005, indicates 53.6% of kindergarten students and 70.6% of 3rd grade students have experienced tooth decay. Even more disturbing, 27.9% of kindergarten students and 28.7% of 3rd graders suffer from untreated decay.

The impact of untreated dental disease on society affects children in lost school days and extends into adulthood, with days of missed work and negative social and health consequences.

- California has the highest rate of emergency department utilization in the nation for preventable dental conditions. In 2012 there were 113,000 visits to California emergency departments with an estimated cost nationally of 1.6 billion dollars.<sup>1</sup>
- In 2009-2012 nearly half of U.S. adults age 30 and older, and 70 percent of adults age 65 and older, had some form of periodontal disease.<sup>2</sup>
- According to a 2014 Journal of American Preventive Medicine Journal, patients with Type 2 diabetes who received periodontal treatment reduced their hospital

admissions by 39.4% and total medical costs by 40.2%, from \$7,056 to \$4,216.

- The same study also states similar savings in healthcare costs to the State for other chronic diseases are realized when periodontal treatment was provided.

## Exploring Options in Saving

With hopes of reversing the state's failing grade in healthcare, California has launched a plan to promote oral health and prevent dental disease.

The 2018-2028 California Oral Health Plan (COHP) has the ambitious vision of "Healthy Mouths for all Californians."

The 5 goals outlined in the California Oral Health Plan are to:

1. Improve the oral health of Californians by addressing determinants of health, and promote healthy habits and prevention interventions to attain a healthier status in communities;
2. Align dental health care delivery systems, payment systems and community programs to support and sustain increasing utilization of dental services;
3. Collaborate with payers, public health programs, health care systems, foundations, professional organizations, and educational institutions to expand infrastructure, capacity and payment systems for supporting prevention and treatment services;
4. Develop and implement communication strategies to inform and educate the public, dental teams, and decision makers about oral health information, programs, and policies;
5. To track progress, develop and implement a system to measure key indicators of oral health and identify key performance measures.

developing their own local oral health projects (LOHP). These LOHPs help advance the objectives of the COHP.

Registered Dental Hygienists and Registered Dental Hygienists in Alternative Practice have an opportunity to partner with Local Oral Health Jurisdictions (counties).

If you have the desire to impact oral health on a public health level, contact your local public health department to explore these Local Oral Health Programs. Hygienists can play a critical role in oral disease prevention, have a great impact on patient's overall health and help save their patients and their communities money.



*"CDHA is excited about the opportunities Local Oral Health Programs can offer hygienists in every county of California. We are committed to bridging any gap between hygienists and program directors."*

Susan McLearn, RDHAP, MS  
CDHA Liaison

One way to track progress is through the Medi-Cal Dental Program (formerly known as Denti-Cal). Using claims submitted by providers, Medi-Cal has established baselines and short term targets. (See Chart)

## Measurable Objectives

Indicators	Baseline	Target
<b>CARIES EXPERIENCE</b>		
Kindergarten	53.6% (2004-05)	42.9%
Third Grade	70.6% (2004-05)	56.6%
<b>UNTREATED CARIES</b>		
Kindergarten	27.9% (2004-05)	22.3%
Third Grade	28.7% (2004-05)	23.0%
Preventive dental visit among Medicaid children (0-20 years)	37.8%	47.8%
Children with dental sealant on a molar (6-9 years)	27.6%	33.1%

## Oral Health Promotion Programs

For every dollar spent for dental prevention services, the return is an estimated \$8.00. The time has come to focus on and implement oral health promotion programs on a public health level utilizing every dental provider to their full scope of practice. With funding from Prop 56 (the California Healthcare, Research and Prevention Tobacco Tax Act of 2016), county health departments are

*"I am so fortunate to work in the public health sector after working in the private sector for 34 years working as the project manager of the state's oral health program is an easy jump! I love working on a larger scale with the public and having a dental hygiene background made the transition seem natural. It is so rewarding collaborating with so many fantastic agencies and community partners who are all willing to help with eliminating the oral health burden. I am looking forward to implementing the California States Oral health plan and making a difference here in my community, San Benito County!"*

Jennifer Frusetta, RDH  
Public Health Services, San Benito County

## References in online version

### About the Author:

Rhoda Gonzales, RDHAP, has had a diverse career as a dental hygiene clinician, instructor, consultant, medical practice office manager and, most recently, a director of quality for a health plan.

Working closely with local and state organizations to improve oral health has given Rhoda a strong appreciation and understanding of collaboration and has fueled her passion for advancing prevention and access to quality care.



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