

A NEGLECTED EPIDEMIC: ACCESS TO ORAL HEALTH CARE

With so much focus on the healthcare crisis in the United States, one area is rarely discussed – the epidemic of oral disease running rampant in our communities, especially among children, the elderly and low-income populations. Millions of Californians are without dental care; not surprisingly rates of dental disease are increasing rapidly. A primary mission of the California Dental Hygienists' Association (CDHA) is to address this problem by improving the public's access to dental hygiene and other dental healthcare. The following is based on information from CDHA and the Dental Health Foundation's recently released results of its 2006 oral health survey, available at www.dentalhealthfoundation.org.

The Importance of Dental Hygiene

Sound dental health is integral to childhood development, health and socialization. It also is critical for adults, especially seniors. For example:

- Primary teeth are necessary for chewing and pronouncing specific speech sounds.
- They hold space for developing permanent teeth and contribute to a child's self-esteem.
- Tooth decay can interfere with any of these.
- Severe tooth decay can make children sick. Kids with tooth decay are prone to repeated infections in their ears, their sinuses, and other parts of their bodies, because there infected teeth are continually pouring pathogens into their systems. Routine dental screenings can expose other serious health problems requiring treatment.
- Many children who experience oral diseases early in childhood continue to have dental problems the rest of their lives.
- Seniors represent some of our most vulnerable populations and suffer more often from dry mouth and decay on the tooth root.

The Crisis in California

In California, the problem is worse than most other states in the nation

- California ranks near the bottom for children's dental care
- Of the 25 states surveyed, California ranks 24th, second only to Arkansas
- By third grade, nearly two-thirds of California children are affected by dental disease
- The single most widespread disease among children in California is tooth decay – not obesity or asthma; poor and minority children suffer most from dental caries
- 28 percent – some 750,000 elementary school children -- have untreated tooth decay
- 4 percent – about 138,000 – need urgent dental care due to pain or infection
- Painful cavities and abscesses are causing children to miss school and, in the worst scenarios, end up hospitalized; nearly six percent of the state's poorest children are in so much pain, or have such bad infections, that they need urgent treatment