In Massachusetts, more than 76 percent of the elderly receive health care services paid by Medicare; however, there is no Medicare coverage for basic dental services. The 2000 Special Legislative Commission’s Report, The Oral Health Crisis in Massachusetts, raised everyone’s accountability, and the public and private sectors began a variety of oral health initiatives, with a primary focus on children. In addition, a 2005 federal court order against the MassHealth Dental Program put a greater focus on improving the children’s dental program. Unfortunately, little attention was paid to adults and the elderly, in spite of their great dental needs. Although it is important to make children a high priority for prevention and treatment, better oral health is not effectively reinforced in the home if the parents and grandparents are dental cripples, or are not able to obtain dental care for themselves. A dentist may provide care to a child two to three times a year, but the child’s parents are role models every day, and most parents become grandparents.

In 2002, the Adult MassHealth Dental Program was essentially eliminated. It was restored in 2006 with no significant improvements in the fee schedule. There are approximately 597,000 adults in the MassHealth program, and of the 15,660 members over age 65, only about 55 percent (41,651) utilized the dental program in fiscal year 2007, compared to 72 percent of all Massachusetts seniors over age 65 who saw a dentist.

What Are the Dental Needs of Seniors?

52 percent of elders examined in elder housing facilities needed dental care, and 15 percent needed urgent care.10

42 percent had urgent needs during the last year and were unable to obtain care.8

39 percent did not seek care because they were unable to afford it.9

60 percent of those in elder housing had untreated dental caries.4

87 percent of homebound seniors had untreated dental caries.10

More than 70 percent of the homebound had their last dental visit more than three years ago and 38 percent had soft-tissue lesions.10

Senior citizens who live in extended-care facilities (nursing homes) and who are homebound probably have the greatest oral health needs among the elderly.2 In Massachusetts in 2006, approximately 89.4 percent (45,069) of the 50,416 extended-care beds in the Commonwealth were filled at any one point in time.3 Of those, 66 percent were MassHealth members and 49 percent had dementia.4 In our state, there are also approximately 10,500 extended-care living and residential-care beds in 171 facilities.5 Another 9.9 percent of all Medicaid recipients receive home health services.3

About 5.4 percent of the elderly population in the United States live in extended-care facilities at any time, and it is estimated that 66 percent of the U.S. population over 65 will need some form of long-term care at some point in their lifetime.6 How much care and preventive services—both professional and by caretakers—are very difficult to obtain for those in extended-care facilities, and this significantly contributes to making such care one of their greatest needs. It is also difficult to find a dentist who is willing to make a home visit or to see a patient in a nursing home or extended-care facility, and even more difficult in rural areas. This is a serious gap in the dental care delivery system.

Recommendations

1. Dentistry needs to take the lead. The entire spectrum of dental professionals, along with other providers, extended-care facilities and organizations, foundations, insurance companies, local and state government, and senior citizen groups, need to work together with an interdisciplinary approach to respond to these unmet needs.

2. Model programs must be developed. Model demonstration projects are needed for developed for extended-care, assisted-living, and elder housing facilities, as well as for senior daycare centers and homebound patients in different parts of the state—especially rural areas. Practicing dentists, student dentists, dental hygienists, and dental assistants need to learn to be comfortable using portable dental equipment to treat these patients in alternate delivery sites. This has been done in the past for dental patients from children through seniors. Prevention is better than cure. Fluoridation has been shown to help prevent root caries in the elderly.8

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References


