Medicaid Adult Dental Benefits: The Costs of Emergency Only

Adult dental coverage is an optional Medicaid coverage category that states can choose to include. Coverage is different in each state with some state providing full adult dental benefits, others providing limited benefits based on procedure or billing limits and other provide no coverage, leaving emergency departments as the only place to access care for oral health issues. As states deal with the reality of increasing health care costs, there are solid reasons for providing this coverage.

Lack of coverage is leading people to seek more expensive care in emergency rooms:
- Nationwide the number of emergency department visits and hospital inpatient stays related to dental conditions increased 16 percent between 2006 and 2009.
- Forty-two percent of emergency department cases had dental caries (cavities) as the first-listed diagnosis in 2009.
- In 2009, 63 percent of inpatient stays had dental abscess, an infection of the mouth, face, jaw or throat that begins as a tooth infection, as the primary diagnosis.
- Eliminating Medicaid benefits is tied to increased Emergency Room visits. Michigan reported more than a 10 percent increase in emergency room visits after a two-year period during which the state reduced Medicaid dental coverage for adults.

These decisions are impacting state budgets:
- Nationwide, uninsured patients and patients with Medicaid totaled 71% of treat and release hospital dental cases and 47 percent of all hospital admission cases in 2009.
- The average cost of a Medicaid enrollee’s in-patient ER treatment for dental problems is nearly 10 times the average cost of preventative care in a dentist’s office.
- In 2007, more than 10,000 visits to hospital ERs for dental reasons cost Medicaid or other public programs almost $5 million in Iowa.

Despite the high cost of care being provided in emergency rooms, people are not getting the care they need.
- Most emergency rooms are not staffed with dentists, and their staff is not trained to treat underlying oral health problems.
- Studies have pointed to as many as 80 percent of those receiving care in an emergency room needing subsequent care from a dentist.
- This leads to repeat visits. A study in Minnesota found that almost 20 percent of dental related visits were made by people who had previously sought care.

Sources: