

Increasing Access to Dental Care by Providing DentiCal Maps

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Executive Summary:

Approximately 79% of California's dentists do not provide care for low-income patients who rely on Medi-Cal. This can make it incredibly difficult for patients to identify and establish dental homes, especially for those who do not readily have access to a computer or the internet.

Introduction:

What are the social determinants of health? This list can become very lengthy as it includes all general socio-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions. For example, all of the following must be considered when discussing the social determinants of health: agriculture and food production, education, work environment, living and working conditions, unemployment, water and sanitation, healthcare services, housing, social and community networks, individual lifestyle factors, age, sex, and constitutional factors. (Dahlgren, Whitehead 1991) When the people of California lack any of these social determinants of health, in combination with the lack of available dentists for low-income patients, the search for adequate dental healthcare can seem impossible and may fall completely to the bottom of a list of priorities. To help create a more approachable environment for access to dental care, we recommend that patients be provided with hard and virtual copies of DentiCal-accepting dental providers so that patients have an easier time finding dental care without having to navigate confusing webpages.

Research Overview/Extent of the Problem:

We have found that when comparing the distribution of overall health expenditures versus the distribution of dental expenditure by source of financing, about 40% of all patients are paying out of pocket for dental work compared to about 11% for overall health expenditures (ADA 2017). In addition, we can see that only 48% of children ages 2-18, 35% of adults ages 19-64, and 44% of adults ages 65+ visited the dentist in 2014. This is not even half of the population. Clearly there is an issue with access to care when simply viewing these data points. Furthermore, there is a skewed distribution of dentists in California, as more choose to work in metropolitan areas such as San Francisco or Southern California (Lai). As a result, it is more difficult for individuals living in more rural areas to find a dental home.

Critique of Current Approaches:

Currently, there is very little being done. Dental care is not highly prioritized by the government, and it is not prioritized by schools and hospitals, both of which can help to publicize its importance in a relatively easy manner. Current approaches involving Denti-Cal are not reaching their target populations due to the lack of education provided throughout our communities, which should be provided by local dentists.

Recommendations for Action:

- Provide a professionally approved dental home-care pamphlet along with the DentiCal provider map
- Create a website with engaging, short, and easy to understand content to help patients understand the importance of dental care
- Promote dental well-being on a state and national level, emphasizing its importance and relation to whole body health; The mouth is connected to the body and is the entry point for all nutrition
- Currently, LAC-USC hospital is establishing a strong example for other Medi-Cal providers. LAC-USC hospital providers will refer patients to appropriate dental facilities when a lack of dental care is identified.

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