

Improving Reimbursement Rate for Comprehensive Dental Treatment Under General Anesthesia

Introduction

According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), dental caries is one of the most prevalent infectious diseases in children in the United States. 42% of children aged 2 to 11 have had dental caries in their primary teeth.

Early childhood caries (ECC) has been defined by the AAPD as the presence of one or more decayed, missing, or filled tooth surfaces in any primary tooth in a child under the age of 6. ECC, if left untreated, leads to immediate and long-term complications that affect the well-being and quality of life of the affected individual. While there are various behavior interventions available to dentists, general anesthesia is used when a young patient presents with ECC and lacks cooperation necessary for treatment in a conventional dental setting.

General anesthesia (GA) is a clinician-controlled state of patient unconsciousness accompanied by a loss of protective reflexes, including the ability to maintain an airway independently and respond purposefully to physical stimulation or verbal command. Although the upfront cost of GA is higher than other pharmacologic methods of behavior guidance, it can lead to lower overall costs for extensive dental treatment by allowing the clinician to perform all treatment during one visit with minimal discomfort to the child. Additionally, if lost wages for multiple appointments were included in the cost, treatment with GA would be much less expensive than treatment with other forms of sedation.

Issue

Currently, the reimbursement rate for GA with dental insurance plans is very low and barely covers the costs of expenses and time. Thus, in order for a patient with DentiCal insurance to receive treatment with GA, they must ensure that they've found a reputable location that provides treatment for DentiCal patients and wait for the preauthorization process to go through. This low reimbursement rate prevents many clinics from being willing and able to provide care and often has the effect of denying access to quality oral health care for this subset of the population.

Importance

We advocate for an increase in the reimbursement rate for GA costs in the government subsidized dental insurance plans, such as DentiCal in California.

Impact

This could help increase the number of sites providing care, and effectively shorten wait lists for treatment in other sites. In doing so, this will also expand access to quality, non-traumatic care for many patients that have DentiCal dental insurance, but do not have MediCal medical insurance, or who are older than 7 years old.

Recommendation

The recommendation in this policy is to increase reimbursement for all hospital or clinical costs for GA dental treatment in the benefits of DentiCal subscribers.