



More funding needed to help disabled adults get dental care

ILKA K. RIDDLE • November 1, 2010

Teeth. Most of us have them, at least for a good part of our lives. We generally take reasonably good care of them; we brush and floss them and go to the dentist on a regular basis. We don't notice them too much until we get food stuck in them, or have a cavity, or one breaks and the pain starts.

Just imagine if you couldn't brush your own teeth, or tell someone when you had food stuck in your teeth, or that your mouth hurts, or that your tooth is broken and you need to see a dentist right away.

That is what happens often to people with disabilities.

Research on dental health suggests that poor oral health is linked to increased risks for chronic health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes. This problem is even more pronounced among individuals with disabilities because of their notoriously limited access to dental care.

A survey conducted with individuals with disabilities in Delaware on their health status showed that almost a quarter (24.3 percent) of adults surveyed did not receive regular dental care, and adults who depend on state health insurance do not have dental care coverage through Medicaid.

In 2008, the first-ever forum on dental care for individuals with disabilities in Delaware took place at the urging of Dr. Glen Goleburn. As a result of the forum, the Alliance on Oral Health Care for Individuals with Disabilities (the Alliance) was formed.

The Alliance unites caring people from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. Included are dental and medical professionals, family members, individuals with disabilities, advocates, academics, legislators and state government representatives.

The alliance formed to identify needs and develop solutions for Delawareans of all ages with disabilities. Alliance members wish to raise

awareness of the challenges that exist for these individuals, as well as highlight the successes that have recently been achieved.

While many of us have some anxiety, financial difficulty or other challenge associated with our access to dental care, individuals with disabilities often face multiple difficulties. Recent studies have shown that one's knowledge of dental care is a major predictor of dental health.

Patients with cognitive disabilities are often dependent on others for assistance, whether for transportation, home care activities, treatment decision-making, and/or payment. Physical disabilities can limit a patient's ability to practice effective dental hygiene and to access adequate care in a dental office.

While Delaware offers a good Medicaid program to meet the needs of children who qualify, virtually no financial assistance is available for adults with unmet needs.

The alliance is committed to examining the issues and developing solutions. Some of the issues identified at the forum and by the alliance:

- Lack of awareness among members of the general public about the challenges and barriers individuals with disabilities face in receiving quality (or any) dental care.
- Lack of dental care coverage for adults with disabilities who receive health coverage through Medicaid.



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- Lack of expertise among dental health professionals relative to working with individuals with disabilities.
- Inadequate preparation of direct support professionals in promoting the oral hygiene of individuals with disabilities.
- Inadequate education of individuals with disabilities and their family members on appropriate oral health and hygiene techniques.
- Lack of usual and customary reimbursement rates for dental care professionals providing dental care services to individuals with disabilities.

There are several facilities and private offices statewide that focus on meeting the needs of people with disabilities. Training programs are under development for both dental professionals and caregivers of these patients. Regardless of one's view on government-funded health care, almost all can agree that people whose disabilities are sufficiently severe to warrant constant care should have state assistance.

As stated earlier, the alliance has identified that lack of state funding for adults with disabilities is a major impediment to dental care, and poor dental health is known to be a factor in a wide range of non-dental medical conditions.

If Delaware's elected officials allocate funding for dental care for adults with disabilities, the state and private entities charged with caring for these patients can meet their needs.

Ilka K. Riddle chairs the Alliance on Oral Health Care for Individuals with Disabilities.

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