Helping children with special health-care needs

Making sure that any child appropriately cares for his or her teeth and mouth and has adequate access to oral health care is a challenge. That challenge is amplified when dealing with children who have special health-care needs. These are children who have, or are at increased risk for, chronic physical, developmental, behavioral or emotional conditions.

There are definite challenges in providing services for this group of youngsters, including:

- A shortage of dentists in many geographic areas and dentists who may lack the training necessary to treat children with special health-care needs.
- A lack of insurance or a lack of providers who can accept the type of coverage carried by the patient.
- A lack of a dental home or medical home that manages all general health care, oral health care and the specialty care that these children need.
- Parents and/or caregivers who are not experienced in training their children about self-care, eating healthy foods and obtaining regular oral health-care services.

Sue Burns, program administrator with the North Dakota Department of Health’s Division of Children’s Special Health Services (CSHS), stresses the importance of providing adequate oral health services for children with special health-care needs.

“When everyone, neglected oral health may exacerbate health problems, and this is especially true for children with special health-care needs,” Burns said. “When oral health problems are not tended to, overall health can suffer, making it even harder to enjoy a good quality of life.

“Beyond typical oral health-care issues, many children with special health-care needs are dealing with oral health problems such as gum hyperplasia or tooth decay from the medicine they take or conditions associated with nutritional deficiencies, feeding problems or malpositioned teeth,” Burns said. “This makes it even more important to get the right kind of oral health care on an ongoing basis.”

Ways to help ensure proper oral health care for children with special health-care needs include:

- Educating parents and caregivers about promoting appropriate self-care, proper nutrition and the importance of obtaining regular dental care.
- Promoting a dental home that works hand in hand with the child’s medical home, ensuring that all his or her overall health-care needs are being met.
- Connecting families to dentists who can offer specialized care for their children.
- Coordinating insurance coverages as some medical insurances may cover dental issues if they are a result of a medical condition.

CSHS may be able to pay for dental services for children birth to age 21 who have cleft lip and palate, handicapping malocclusion, ectodermal dysplasia or congenital dental disorders. CSHS also administers cleft lip and palate clinics in the four quadrants of the state, where a team of providers evaluates the children and their families and provides recommendations for future care. For more information about CSHS or the cleft lip and palate clinics, visit the CSHS website at www.ndhealth.gov/cshs.

A fact sheet about the topic also is available at www.ndhealth.gov/oralhealth. Click Fact Sheets and Oral Health for Children with Special Health-Care Needs.
Top oral health policies named at workshop

Members of the Oral Health Coalition, along with many other oral health advocates—including representatives from public health, community health centers, dental hygienists, advocacy groups, the state dental and dental hygiene associations and others—recently came together in Bismarck to prioritize statewide oral health policies. The group was led by policy tool facilitator, Dr. Lynn Mouden.

Working together, the group came up with 18 potential policy issues. After breaking into several smaller groups, workshop attendees scored and ranked potential policies as to whether they were feasible, quantifiable and would reach the intended population and determined the level of urgency for each policy. When all scores and rankings were added together, the list was narrowed down to the top five policy issues:

- Continuing and expanding of the dental loan repayment program for dentists.
- Developing an economic development healthcare program and coalition.
- Increasing funding for dental Medicaid and safety-net dental clinics.
- Creating an awareness program about oral health and general health with emphasis on educating legislators.
- Creating an integrated scope of practice addressing expanded function dental assistants, public health dental hygienists and “mid-level providers.”

According to Joe Cichy, president of the North Dakota Oral Health Coalition, the priorities that were determined in the meeting will now go to the Oral Health Coalition’s Policy subcommittee to create the specific policies they would like to see happen in North Dakota. The subcommittee will then seek the approval of the entire Oral Health Coalition and work to have specific bills drawn up that can be introduced at the 2011 legislative session.

“We worked very hard at the workshop to pinpoint the most important policy issues,” Cichy said. “I think the group did a great job of coming up with policies that will help increase access to oral health, educate about the importance of oral health and implement prevention programs throughout our state. It’s exciting to see what the future holds.”
Spotlight on Red River Valley Dental Access Project

The Red River Valley Dental Access Project offers an urgent-care walk-in dental clinic located in Moorhead, Minn., that began offering services in 2002. The clinic provides immediate relief of dental pain to low-income patients.

The clinic serves about 65 to 70 patients a month during its open hours, which include Tuesday evenings and the first and third Friday of the month. Patients are served on a first-come, first-served basis, with no appointments taken. A fee of $20 is charged at the time of each service.

Services include extractions, sedative/temporary fillings, palliative treatment, management of oral infections and assessment of minor dental trauma. Staff members work part-time and include nine dental assistants, one front desk person, one urgent-care dental director and one executive director.

Dentists working at the clinic volunteer their time. Executive Director Michelle Berg sings the praises of the volunteer dentists. “We are so lucky to have 40 volunteer dentists from the area who give their time so freely to help out this cause,” she said. “We also are blessed to have six oral surgeons and three pediatric dentists to whom we can refer our patients if we are unable to offer needed specialized care.”

She also thanks the staff at the clinic for being so dedicated. “We also have an awesome staff who have all been with us for a while and give their time at a lower wage than they would normally be paid at other dental offices,” Berg said. “They believe in our cause and want to help out those in need.”

Berg is pleased that the clinic is able to serve the community. “There are many people with no options for a dentist because they either have no insurance or cannot find a dentist that will accept the medical assistance they receive,” Berg said. “We are a safety net for those in need of immediate relief of dental pain, but who don’t have a way to pay. Our clinic helps to lower the demand on local emergency rooms, urgent-care medical facilities and dentists unable to offer low-cost services.”

A Directory of Dental Access Programs fact sheet is available on the Oral Health Program website at [www.ndhealth.gov/oralhealth](http://www.ndhealth.gov/oralhealth). Click Fact Sheets and Brochures and Directory of Dental Access Programs. This fact sheet includes information about where to find free or reduced-cost dental care for children and families. It includes a listing of all the safety-net dental clinics, state-sponsored health programs, donated dental services and screening and referral programs.
Join the North Dakota Oral Health Coalition

The North Dakota Oral Health Coalition (NDOHC) represents public, private and nonprofit organizations and individuals interested in developing and promoting innovative strategies to achieve optimal oral health for all North Dakotans.

If you are interested in joining the coalition, complete and mail the application below, call 701.328.2356 or 800.472.2286 (press 1), or send an e-mail to cebach@nd.gov.

The next coalition meeting will be Dec. 10, 2010, from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. at the Gold Seal Building in Bismarck.

North Dakota Oral Health Coalition
Membership Application

Name: ____________________________
Title: ____________________________
Organization: ______________________
Mailing Address: ____________________
City, State, Zip: ____________________
Telephone: __________________________
E-mail Address: ______________________

Send to: North Dakota Oral Health Coalition, North Dakota Department of Health, 600 E. Boulevard Ave., Dept. 301, Bismarck, N.D. 58505-0200.