

Lack of Dental Care Impacts Ohioans and Costs the Health Care System



Tonya, Cincinnati, OH—“I grew up with my single father [who] couldn’t afford insurance for me or my brother. Since we didn’t have insurance my teeth are in a bad state of decay. As a child I went to a dentist twice. I do better for my children than I had as a child.”

Jobs

Studies have shown that chronic, untreated oral disease negatively affects not only health but quality of life and economic productivity. Missing teeth in children can be cute but comes with high costs for adults. Adults with visible dental problems are less employable.

Carolyn, Toledo, OH—“I am ashamed to get a job working in public, but I have great skills that would allow me to do so. Without front teeth my self-esteem is zero.”

Cheryl, Columbus, OH—“I lost my job and my regular dental care is no longer possible due to severe income shortage. Broken teeth and lack of regular dental care (including teeth cleaning) is not helpful to my job search.”

In addition to not finding work, untreated dental disease can be extremely painful and can affect a person’s productivity at work. According to a report by the Surgeon General, employed adults lose an estimated 164 million hours of work due to oral health problems or dental visits each year.

Higher Health Care Costs

Increasingly, Ohioans without access to regular dental care are using emergency rooms to treat dental issues. And many emergency departments lack dental services, do not provide definitive care and only treat the symptoms. When the problem is not solved, many return to the emergency room for continued treatment or are referred to an already overburdened dental care safety net system.

Carla, Northwest OH—“ In the last few months, the back tooth started rotting out with swelling and severe pain all over the side of my face. Because of my lack of insurance I was forced to go to an emergency room where they gave me antibiotics and ibuprofen and said ‘Go see a dentist!’ which I cannot afford.”

Patricia, Kent, OH—“I went to the emergency and they gave me some penicillin and naproxen. They gave me that and told me to take that until the pain is gone. Well I did that and the pain is gone but I don’t want the pain to come back. . . They gave me a letter...a referral, but it’s the same people who sent me to Robinson Memorial to the emergency who said they couldn’t do [anything] for me.”



The cost for treating oral health issues in the emergency room is much more expensive than treating them in a primary care setting.

Overall Health

Poor oral health increases the risk of stroke, heart disease—including fatal heart attacks—and diabetes. It can lead to respiratory infections like pneumonia, bone mass loss in older women and premature births.

David, Columbus, OH—“I have major dental problems, including cracked, broken and deteriorating teeth. It is probably influencing my onset of diabetes, and is certainly affecting my ability to get karaoke jobs, for my karaoke business.”

Judi, Cincinnati, OH—“I have been without dental insurance for over 20 years . . . I’ve lost several teeth, have numerous cavities. My gums bleed when I brush and floss. Having congestive heart failure, poor dental care can result in a fatal outcome. I can develop an infection from the bleeding gums that can go to my heart. I have constant tooth pain.”

The health of Ohioans could be improved if we could get them the dental care they need.

Cost of Care

Cost is one reason many Ohioans do not get dental care. 45 percent of Ohio adults do not have dental insurance. 60 percent of seniors have no dental insurance and most Medicare plans do not cover routine dental care. 19 percent of children do not have dental insurance. For many, paying out of pocket is just not an option.



Amanda, Kent, OH—“I can’t go anywhere and get dental work done because they want money up front and I can’t afford it. I have about 6 teeth that need pulled that are almost completely one hundred percent decayed and I have been told that it will cost anywhere between \$120 and \$200 per tooth. I don’t have the money to get it done so I just try home remedies (gargle salt water, tea bag on the abscessed tooth and take an excessive amount of Motrin to relieve the pain). It’s hard and painful but I have no other choice.”

Angie, Northwest, OH—“I haven’t been to see a dentist since I was 18 years old. I am now 30. I don’t have any insurance. I have teeth that do need work and some that need to be removed. I get infections often in my mouth. The pain is sometimes so bad that I’ll stay in bed because I can’t do anything else. I have had two teeth pulled and had to pay out-of-pocket. I could barely afford to pay for it. I am very uncomfortable.”

Dental care is out of reach for too many Ohioans because we cannot afford it or there aren’t enough dentists where we live. In fact, for children and low-income adults, it is the number one unmet health need.

But we can do better. Expanding the dental team is key to expanding access. Registered dental practitioners (RDP) can help more Ohioans get the dental care they need. Working as part of a dentist-led team, these mid-level practitioners provide preventive care and routine, everyday services. That way, dentists can see more patients with greater needs, and RDPs can practice in communities where there aren’t enough dentists.

Dental Access Now! David Maywhoor, Project Director, dmaywhoor@uhcanohio.org, 614-456-0060

UHCAN Ohio is a statewide nonprofit organization working for high quality, accessible, affordable health care for all Ohioans.