Has Access to Dental Services Improved for Children Enrolled in Medicaid?

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“Yes,” say Lister Hill scholar Conan Davis and colleagues. “The proportion of Medicaid-enrolled children who had a dental care visit (DCV) in 2007 increased by 16% compared to 2002. Based on Medicaid claims, services varied substantially by state, age, and type of insurance. The overall percentage of children receiving dental care did not exceed 50% in any state, ranging from 12% to 49% with an average of 33%.”

In 2000, the Surgeon General described “what amounts to a ‘silent epidemic’ of dental and oral diseases” in a report on oral health. The report indicated that those who suffer the worst oral health were poor Americans, especially children, the elderly and racial and ethnic minorities. Despite major expansions in Medicaid and the initiation of the state Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), more than half of poor children aged 2 to 11 years experience tooth decay and this proportion did not substantially change between 1988 and 2004 according to data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES).

Using Medicaid research files, the researchers calculated the prevalence of DCV in 50 states and the District of Columbia, stratifying by age, race, type of health plan, and CHIP status. In this analysis, the researchers found that most dental care is provided to children just entering school systems; in a few states the prevalence of a DCV was more than 60% for children between 6 and 9 years of age. Racial differences were minimal in most of the states and CHIP participation improved access to dental services.

“Our results and those of many others indicate that we are far from meeting the dental needs of poor children in the U.S.,” say the researchers. “These results also indicate that there have been some improvements in dental care for Medicaid-covered children in the past decade but that there remain deficits in most states.”

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