Dental Health Taskforce launches effort to help U.S. children

The U.S. arm of the Global Children’s Dental Health Taskforce is launching an initiative to improve the oral health of toddlers and preschoolers in the U.S. The taskforce is in response to the recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showing that 28 percent of toddlers and preschoolers in the U.S. have tooth decay, and rates of oral disease are even higher among poor and minority children.

The CDC report shows an increase in decay in the primary teeth of children aged 2 to 5 years from 24 percent during the 1980s-1994 timeframe to 28 percent from 1999 through 2004. The study also found that 74 percent of children aged 2 to 11 with tooth decay have unfilled cavities.

“Tooth decay remains the single most common chronic disease of children in the U.S.—five times more common than asthma,” warns pediatrician David Reiss, chair of the taskforce and chairman of pediatrics at the University of Toledo College of Medicine. “It is an insidious disease that starts early and can devastate children’s mouths long before they start school.”

The CDC study also shows that tooth decay is more common among minority and low income children.

The proportion of Mexican American and African American children with unfilled cavities is 1.3 times greater than the proportion of white children with untreated dental disease. Children in poverty are more than twice as likely to have untreated cavities as are children from middle income and higher income families.

“What these statistics mean is that too many children suffer from preventable dental disease,” notes taskforce member Steven Kess, vice president of Henry Schein.

The U.S. taskforce will focus on helping pregnant women and new mothers safeguard their children’s oral health. The taskforce also plans to develop model proposals for local cavity-prevention demonstrations in lower-income communities in Baltimore, Md.; Los Angeles, Calif.; Toledo, Ohio; and at a Native American health services site, according to Dr. Brian Edelstein, coordinator of the U.S. effort and chair of the Children’s Dental Health Project, a Washington, D.C., policy organization that promotes children’s oral health.

The U.S. taskforce is one of nine, country-wide efforts aimed at eradicating tooth decay in children worldwide by 2026. Participating countries represent more than half of the world’s child population and also include Australia, Brazil, China, India, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. taskforce’s efforts are guided by Healthy People 2010 objectives that call for reducing childhood tooth decay and expanding dental services. The taskforce promotes strategies developed by the Surgeon General’s Workshop on Children and Oral Health in 2000. Those include increasing public awareness about the importance of early childhood oral health, using science-based strategies, integrating oral health into other childhood programs and medical care, promoting public policies, and assuring services for all children.

“The decision by the U.S. component of our global taskforce to focus on young children holds tremendous promise for better quality of life among millions of U.S. children,” says taskforce coordinator Raman Bedi, a professor at Kings College in London. “Early childhood tooth decay worldwide too often sets children up for dental pain and infection that has consequences for their learning readiness, ability to eat, sleep, and experience the normal activities of childhood.”

Noting that “the burden of dental disease is huge anyway” and “we don’t want it to get any worse,” Hayes warns that dental decay in little children is on a downward trend and the spike in early childhood caries could signal a long-term reversal away from better oral health.

“My colleagues have been telling me that they’re seeing more kids with decay,” she says. “This study bears them out.”

Dr. Ron Inge, DDS, vice president, dental director, Washington Dental Service, and interim executive director of the Institute for Oral Health, says that to improve the oral health of children, four changes are needed.

More dentists need to be trained to treat children, there has to be an end to a one-size-fits-all approach to dentistry, access to care needs to be strengthened, and dental coverage should be reformed and expanded.

“Poor populations, urban schools have done a great job teaching their students to be surgeries—how to treat cavities, infections and other oral ailments in people over age three. But traditional methods to fight tooth decay including fluoridated water, standard fluoride tooth pastes, and restorative dentistry can only accomplish so much, and do not solve the problem of transmissible bacteria,” he says in a statement issued in response to the CDC report.

“In addition to training general dentists to treat young children, we need to find ways to overcome the shortage of dentists in rural and lower-income areas. The answer is to cross-train primary care and family practice doctors to conduct basic oral health exams and treatments.

“Finally, we need to fix dental insurance. Everyone, especially children, needs access to oral healthcare, not just people with dental insurance. The current model of providing health insurance for the poor is broken and inadequate for dealing with childhood dental disease. Children are 2.5 times more likely to lack dental insurance than medical insurance. Dental care is an integral part of healthcare and should be viewed that way by government and employers.”

The global taskforce was established in 2006 after 40 senior dental advisors and chief dental officers called for its formation at the European Union Presidency meeting in England in September 2005. It is supported by the government of the United Kingdom in affiliation with the World Health Organization and Colgate-PalmoIve.

How to help

Henry Schein (www.henryschein.com)

For information, contact Jason Krause, project manager for Sulli-van-Schein Dental, at 414.290.2555 or jason.krause@henryschein.com.

For Henry Schein Cares, contact Kim Craig, business development manager for Henry Schein, at 615.454.3115 or kim.craig@henryschein.com.

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National Children’s Oral Health Foundation (www.ncohf.org)

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Oral Health America (www.oralhealthamerica.org)

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