

# THE RECORD

DENTAL PROGRAM'S END LEAVES BIG HOLE

## POOR ADULTS WITH NO INSURANCE WON'T GET PREVENTIVE CARE

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April 07, 2009  
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STOCKTON - The elimination beginning July 1 of adult Denti-Cal - the state's dental insurance program for its poorest residents - will leave a painful cavity in California's health care safety net that could prove disastrous to fill later, according to advocates for the program.

It will affect about 15,000 to 20,000 adults in San Joaquin County alone, leaving them without dental benefits. Statewide, it will affect as many as 3million adults, according to figures provided by the California HealthCare Foundation.

Many of those people will delay treatment because they cannot pay for it. Eventually, though, the treatment they will require will be more complex and expensive.

While the program elimination does not directly impact the more than 1million children receiving dental benefits - including 25,000 to 30,000 in San Joaquin County - they, too, will be affected as more dentists drop out and parents formerly in the program don't take their children to the dentist on a regular basis, the advocates say.

That's what happened when Massachusetts eliminated its adult dental benefits program.

The Denti-Cal program elimination was triggered recently when California failed to qualify for the full \$10billion federal stimulus package. It came up short by close to \$1.8billion, and several Medi-Cal optional benefits, including adult dental, chiropractic, incontinence creams and washes, acupuncture, audiology, optometry, podiatry, speech therapy and psychology services, were cut by the governor and the Legislature.

"It's a horrific decision. Denti-Cal is the primary payer source for most community health clinics, accounting for 50 to 80 percent of the payer source at a clinic," said Carmela Castellano-Garcia, president and chief executive officer of the California Primary Care Association, which represents the state's nonprofit community clinics and health centers that serve some of its poorest residents.

Stockton-based Community Medical Centers Inc. is one of those providers. It operates 11 sites in three counties, including Channel Medical Center and San Joaquin Valley Dental Group in downtown Stockton.

Its health clinics in San Joaquin County handled 165,000 visits in 2008, and that number is expected to grow by 10,000 in the next 18 months.

Last year, the dental clinic's two dentists at 230 N. California St. handled 8,000 visits, seeing 20 patients a day, according to Community Medical Centers' chief executive, Michael Kirkpatrick. About 4,000 of those visits were covered by Denti-Cal payments and, of those, about 50 percent were adult patients.

"We will no longer get paid for 2,000 adult dental visits. Those patients will no longer get care or will have to convert to self-pay," Kirkpatrick said. Overall, it will result in a 20 percent reduction in Valley Dental Group's \$1million annual revenue, he said. Patients who pay themselves are offered a sliding scale for services starting at a minimum of \$45 based upon family income.

Dr. Saadia Khan, medical director of Community Medical Centers, told of a woman who recently came to the dental clinic in a lot of pain.

"She had no insurance. She required a complex extraction that our clinic was unprepared to handle. We had nowhere to refer her to," Khan said.

Chances are the woman's increasing pain will drive her to a hospital emergency room, where the minimum charge for a preventable dental problem averages \$660. At the hospital, Castellano-Garcia said, the median cost is estimated at \$19,400 for dental patients.

When Maryland eliminated its adult dental benefits program in 1993, according to Castellano-Garcia, emergency room visits for dental issues rose 21 percent in one year.

And, she said, emergency rooms are generally ill-equipped to provide more than extractions, antibiotics and pain medication.

In some more rural areas of California, the elimination of Denti-Cal payments will result in some of the state's 256 community dental clinics shutting down, Castellano-Garcia said.

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