



The Health Consumer Alliance

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What Would Eliminating Medi-Cal Adult Dental Benefits Mean for Real People?

The Governor's 2009-10 budget proposes to eliminate most dental services for adults from the Medi-Cal program. Pregnant women and those in nursing homes would continue to receive dental services and emergency services would still be provided.

To better understand what the elimination of dental services would mean for the poor seniors, parents and people with disabilities who have Medi-Cal we looked at adults served by the Medi-Cal program who called the Health Consumer Alliance (HCA) for assistance with a dental issue. The HCA is a partnership of consumer assistance programs operated by nine local Health Consumer Centers serving thirteen counties that are home to over three-fifths of California's low-income population. HCA's mission is to help low-income people obtain essential health care. The Western Center on Law & Poverty (WCLP) and the National Health Law Program (NHeLP) provide statewide support and policy advocacy for these consumer centers. 238 adults called HCA programs in 2007 about accessing dental services through Medi-Cal.

Without Dental Benefits Poor Californians will Experience:

1. Trouble Eating, Talking and Finding a Job

Teeth are critical for basic life functions such as eating sufficient nutrition to stay healthy and even talking. People who are missing some or all of their teeth have a difficult time finding a job because of the social stigma associated with not having teeth.

"Sue," a 37 year old woman from Sacramento, was in an accident in which she suffered a head injury and lost all but two of her teeth. She was able to get dentures from Medi-Cal. Without this benefit she would only have had two teeth. She would not have been able to eat solid food and it would be very difficult for her to find a job.

"Sara" is a woman in her late 40s whose dental condition caused a loss of over 50% of the bone in her jaw, increasing pain, shifting of her teeth, and bleeding in her mouth. Foregoing surgery would have aggravated all these problems and eventually, without treatment, she would have needed all her teeth pulled. She was able to get corrective surgery through Medi-Cal.

Health Consumer Alliance Partners

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As a community dentist in one of the HCA counties said, “There are lots of recovery homes and treatment centers to help people get their lives together, but they need teeth in order to get back into society.”

2. Worse Overall Health

Dental health is a critical component of overall health. Untreated dental disease has been associated with diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and adverse pregnancy outcomes including low-weight babies.¹ A dental infection can even lead to death if untreated.²

“Mary” is a 67 year-old disabled woman from Placer County who had TMJ that was causing her immense pain and required specialized surgery to fix. Her joint had disintegrated, her hearing was affected, and her neck was in pain due to the TMJ. Mary also had an abscess from a tooth that was draining into her sinuses and could have caused an infection. The tooth needed to be extracted but she could not open her mouth. Prior to the surgery Mary was in extreme pain and could not eat. The Health Rights Hotline assisted her in finding an oral and maxillofacial surgeon who accepted Denti-Cal and could perform the surgery. Foregoing the surgery would have aggravated the many associated problems, causing continued pain, joint disintegration and an infection that could have risked her life.

“Ella” is a 51 year old woman in Orange County with a heart problem. She receives a small county pension due to her disability and has Medi-Cal. The Health Consumer Center assisted her in obtaining Medi-Cal and getting approval for coverage of anesthesia, removal of an erupted tooth, as well as removal and biopsy of a cyst. Leaving these dental conditions untreated could have exacerbated her heart problem.

3. More Pain

Anyone who has ever had a toothache knows how incredibly painful they can be. Without being able to see a dentist and get a tooth treated right away, pain from dental disease will increase for poor Californians. A poor person without dental coverage who called one of our health consumer centers was in so much pain that he pulled his own tooth – a desperate act indeed.

“Mia” is a disabled woman in her late twenties in Sacramento who has a brain tumor and pain-induced seizures. She had two abscessed teeth that were broken and needed several teeth pulled. Mia required general anesthesia for dental work because of her seizure condition. Her primary dentist could not do the work due to the complications but she was able to find an oral surgeon who accepted Denti-Cal and performed the work without Mia having a pain-induced seizure.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General*, National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, National Institutes of Health, 2000.

² Mary Otto, *For Want of a Dentist*, THE WASHINGTON POST, 2/28/07, B1.

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4. A Return to Nursing Home Care

If California no longer provides dental care to adults except those in nursing homes, it could create a perverse incentive for someone living independently to move into a nursing home – at great cost to the state.

“Maria” is an 87 year old woman in Los Angeles County who lost five of her lower teeth. As a result, she had difficulty chewing and eating. These problems exacerbated a digestive condition for which she was being treated. She was able to get partial dentures through Medi-Cal. Without the dentures which allowed her to eat, her digestive condition would have worsened and she might have had to go into a nursing home.

5. Medical Debt

By definition, Medi-Cal beneficiaries have very low incomes; most live below the poverty level. If Medi-Cal stops covering dental services poor parents, seniors and people with disabilities will be billed for services or forego services altogether, risking infection and serious harm to their health. Adults on Medi-Cal already lack the income for basic life necessities such as housing and food and will be forced to incur medical debt if they are responsible for the cost of dental care.

A young woman in Los Angeles was suffering from painful toothaches and needed a root canal on a front tooth. “Pat” could not afford to pay for the treatment so the dentist suggested she get a dental credit card for \$3,200 for the work. The Los Angeles Health Consumer Center advised her that because of her low income she was eligible for Medi-Cal. She enrolled and was able to get the services covered by Denti-Cal, resolving her pain and avoiding medical debt.

There are already strict limits on dental benefits for adults in the Medi-Cal program.

- There is a cap of \$1,800 on most adult dental benefits.
- There are many authorization requirements and benefit limitations in the program. For example, Medi-Cal does not cover laboratory processed crowns for posterior teeth and only covers partial dentures in very rare circumstances. Take the case of a 63 year-old man disabled by diabetes, cancer and leukemia who wanted partial dentures. Despite his multiple health conditions, the partial denture was denied as not medically necessary.

The Bottom Line: Cutting the adult dental benefit from Medi-Cal will mean increased pain and disease, greater difficulty getting or keeping a job, and increased medical debt for poor parents, seniors and people with disabilities in California.

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