



Access to dental care for Medicaid children in Connecticut

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Medicaid (Title XIX of the Social Security Act) was designed to provide medical and dental care for children in low socioeconomic groups. Access to dental care for Medicaid children, however, has not been entirely successful because of a lack of participation among dental providers.^{1,2} In addition, those providers who do participate limit the number of Medicaid patients they treat¹ reportedly because of low reimbursement rates, unacceptable amounts of paperwork, and frequency of broken or canceled appointments.^{1,3,4} This survey was conducted to determine attitudes, practice behaviors, and barriers to dental care for Medicaid children in private offices in Connecticut.

Methods and materials

A questionnaire was mailed in December 1992 to 119 practicing dentists in Connecticut with established interest in treating children. Seventy-three surveyed dentists (61%) were members of the Connecticut Society of Pediatric Dentists (CSPD), and 46 (39%) were members of the Connecticut Society of Dentistry for Children (CSDC). For this survey, CSPD members who were also members of the CSDC were counted only as CSPD members. All surveys were anonymous and sent with an addressed, unstamped envelope. The survey assessed:

1. Type of practice: general vs. pediatric practice (percentage of children in general practice)
2. Participation in Medicaid (percentage of Medicaid children as part of total pediatric practice)
3. Acceptance of new patients (acceptance of new Medicaid children)
4. Acceptability of Medicaid fees on a scale of 1 to 5

5. Acceptability of Medicaid paperwork on a scale of 1 to 5.

Ranking of Medicaid fees/paperwork was considered as acceptable (1 and 2), equivocal (3), or unacceptable (4 and 5).

Results

Seventy-eight (66%) usable questionnaires were returned from 55 pediatric dentists and 23 general dentists. The majority of the dentists surveyed (63%) treated Medicaid children, though many of the Medicaid participants (37%) restricted their participation to less than 10%. Pediatric dentists showed greater participation in the Medicaid program than did general dentists. Most of the dentists reported the Medicaid fees and paperwork to be unacceptable (Table).

TABLE. SURVEY RESULTS OF A QUESTIONNAIRE MAILED TO CONNECTICUT PEDIATRIC DENTISTS AND GENERAL DENTISTS ASSESSING THE AVAILABILITY AND BARRIERS OF DENTAL CARE FOR CHILDREN RECEIVING MEDICAID

Factor	Pediatric Dentists (N = 55)	General Dentists (N = 23)	Total (N = 78)
Medicaid participation	78% (43)	26% (6)	63% (49)
Medicaid < 10%	46% (25)	17% (4)	37% (29)
Accepting new children	98% (54)	96% (22)	97% (76)
Accepting new Medicaid children	38% (21)	13% (3)	31% (24)
Medicaid fees: unacceptable	95% (52)	100% (23)	96% (75)
Medicaid paperwork: unacceptable	71% (39)	83% (19)	74% (58)

Discussion

The majority of the dentists (63%) surveyed treated Medicaid children, reaffirming an earlier report of Medicaid participation for the New England region.² This participation is higher than that for dentists in North Carolina⁴ or for general dentists in Michigan.¹ However, more than one-third of the dentists (37%) restricted their Medicaid participation to less than 10%

of their patients — similar to an earlier report of Michigan general dentists.¹

Four of five Connecticut pediatric dentists reported Medicaid participation compared with one-quarter of general dentists. This study also confirmed earlier reports that pediatric dentists have greater participation in the Medicaid program than do general dentists.^{2,4} However, as with the North Carolina pediatric dentists,⁴ the pediatric dentists in Connecticut (46%) restricted treating Medicaid children to less than 10% of total practice by not accepting new Medicaid patients. This finding suggests that pediatric dentists will reduce further their participation once the current Medicaid patients leave their practices. However, despite this trend, three times as many pediatric dentists (38%) as general dentists (13%) in Connecticut were accepting new Medicaid children, reemphasizing the greater participation of pediatric dentists in the Medicaid program.

This trend of not accepting new Medicaid children or limiting their access is occurring at a time when there is an increase in the number of children covered by the Medicaid program. In Connecticut, the Medicaid population has increased in recent years to approximately 7% of total state population.⁵ The behavior of the dental practitioners follows a similar trend of a decreasing number of enrolled physicians along with limited participation of the enrolled physicians in the Medicaid program in Connecticut.⁵

Reduced access to dental care for those covered by the Medicaid program is known to be due to low provider reimbursement rates.^{3,4} Almost all of the dentists (96%) responding to this survey found Medicaid fees unacceptable. Most (74%) also found Medicaid paperwork too burdensome. Surprisingly, fewer Medicaid participants (65%) than Medicaid nonparticipants

(90%) found the paperwork unacceptable. Such findings are similar to those reported from California where nonparticipating dentists reported complicated Medicaid paperwork to be a more important concern than did participating dentists.³

Conclusions

1. Pediatric dentists participate to a greater extent in the Medicaid program than do general dentists.
2. The majority of the pediatric dentists treating Medicaid children restrict them to less than 10% of total practice by not accepting new Medicaid children.
3. Most dentists found the Medicaid fees and paperwork unacceptable.

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