Medical Providers Can Prevent the Most Common Chronic Childhood Disease ~ Tooth Decay

Many people are not aware that tooth decay (dental cavities) is the most common chronic disease in childhood, and the greatest unmet health need for children. Children in low income households and racial/ethnic minorities have higher rates of cavities. Many may also be surprised to learn about the severe impact children’s oral health problems have on adult life, including lower educational attainment and employability, as well as greater likelihood of cardiovascular, exacerbation of diabetes, and other diseases.

San Francisco’s population is significantly affected by this epidemic. However, since the fall of 2014 a dedicated group of health and children’s professionals and advocates, San Francisco Health Improvement Partnerships’ Children’s Oral Health (SF COH) Collaborative, have been working together to eliminate this health burden.

While there has been an improvement in SF’s children’s oral health status over the past 10 years (i.e. decreased rates of untreated dental problems and cavities) the rates are still too high. In 2013, almost one third of SF Unified School District kindergarteners had untreated dental cavities. Furthermore, the gap between higher rates of tooth decay in children of color versus Caucasian children has persisted.

Children with poorer oral health status are more likely to experience dental pain, miss school, and perform poorly in school. Children in the U.S. miss 51 million hours of school each year due to dental related illnesses. Yet, attendance is an important factor in school success!

Studies show that better attendance is related to higher academic achievement for students of all backgrounds, but particularly for children with lower socio-economic status. The findings in one major study suggest that improving children's oral health status may be a way to improve their educational experience.

While many children living in low-income homes are eligible for dental services through Denti-Cal, given the high demand for dentists, over half of eligible children in San Francisco do not see a dentist even once a year. In contrast, nearly 80% of these children visit their medical provider consistently. It is estimated that a young child is seen 11 times by a medical provider, before ever being seen by a dentist.

The great news is that dental caries is highly preventable! Integration of basic oral health screenings, fluoride varnish application (a quick and easy procedure), oral health education, and referral to a dental home, into all well child visits for low-income children, can have a great impact on children’s dental health and the associated health disparities.
These efforts are in line with guidelines set by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians, and other professional bodies. In 2014, the United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) added to their recommendations that fluoride varnish should be applied to young children’s teeth in the doctor’s office.

The San Francisco Health Network and Kaiser Permanente, who have become leaders in the SF COH integration efforts, have already found ways to seamlessly integrate this cost-effective prevention into routine well child care visits, with minimal disruption to the families and clinics. The SF Health Network’s Children’s Health Center at San Francisco General Hospital has integrated this service successfully since 2005. In 2015, the Family Health Center (also within the SF Health Network) was the first large family medicine clinic in San Francisco that integrated the application of fluoride varnish into well child visits, and the rate of fluoride varnish has more than tripled (baseline rate 5% to 18% in January 2016).

The San Francisco Health Plan (SFHP), another member of the SF Children’s Oral Health Collaborative, is also committed to improving children’s oral health and is working on systems to encourage in-network clinics to offer fluoride varnish to eligible members’ age 0 through 5 years. This February is the 75th anniversary of National Children’s Dental Health Month. Now is the time to put an end to this highly preventable disease.

Adapted from an article submitted to the SF Medical Society; By Susan Fisher-Owens, MD, MPH, Maryna Spiegel, MPH, Cecilia Gonzalez, MD, Irene Hilton, DDS, MPH, Abby Wolf, RN, Margaret Fisher, RDHAP, Lisa Chung, DDS, MPH, Claudia Mooney, MD

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