Brushing Up on Oral Health and Pregnancy

In 2005, Time Magazine selected the connection between preterm birth and poor oral health as the health story of the year. In the US, nearly 10 percent of pregnancies result in preterm, low birth weight babies. Preterm birth is the leading perinatal health problem in the United States costing $5 Billion in healthcare costs each year.

A growing body of evidence suggests that gum diseases (periodontal infections) are associated with preterm and low-birth weight births. Pregnant women who have gum disease may be six times more likely to have a baby that is born too early and too small (Low birth weight, LBW). Researchers and students in the Tulane University Department of Epidemiology are currently exploring the potential link between LBW and periodontal disease.

Louisiana continues to report some of the highest rates of low birth weight babies. However, results from the 2004 PRAMS Surveillance report found that only a third of women discussed oral health with their healthcare provider during pregnancy.

Louisiana has recently expanded WIC funding to include dental visits for pregnant women. Women still face challenges in finding a dentist who will accept patients. Oral health is a promising new avenue to improve the health of women and children.

Oral Health: Areas for Leadership

From: Brushing Up on Children's Oral Health in Louisiana: A Policy Brief
A project of Agenda for Children and the Oral Health Program, Office of Public Health, Department of Health and Human Services.

- Focus Area: Prevention
Louisiana is not taking full advantage of the proven preventive measures available to prevent oral diseases. Community water fluoridation, the single most effective and efficient means of preventing tooth decay, is currently available to 48% of Louisiana communities. In 1998 only 22% of surveyed Louisiana 3rd graders had dental sealants, which is well below the Healthy People 2010 objective of 50% (Healthy People 2010 is a national initiative of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

- Focus Area: Low Provider Participation in Medicaid/LaChip
Medicaid eligible children in Louisiana are 3-5 times more likely to have untreated dental decay than non-eligible children. Though there are several factors that contribute to low utilization rates of dental services among low-income Medicaid-eligible families, the most prevalent is finding a dentist to treat them. In some areas of the state, the waiting list to see a dentist that accepts Medicaid is 4-6 months.

- Focus Area: Availability of Dentists
There is an inequitable distribution of dentists through out the state, especially in rural areas. Sixteen Louisiana parishes are designated by the federal government to be Health Professional Short...
Children and Oral Health

According to the 2001 report *Guidelines for State and Territorial Oral Health Programs*, dental care is the most prevalent unmet health need of children in the United States. Early tooth loss due to decay can result in failure to thrive, reduced self-esteem, and the development of permanent disabilities that affect children’s ability to learn and grow.

- American children lose 52 million school days each year due to oral health-related illness.
- Seventeen percent (17%) of preschool-aged children and 50% of school-aged children have experienced tooth decay in their primary teeth.
- Sixty percent (60%) of adolescents have gum disease.
- The average adolescent in America has 4 decayed, missing, or filled tooth surfaces.
- Thirty-one percent (31%) of all children aged 6 through 8 and 22% of 15 year-olds have untreated dental caries.
- Approximately 63% of children age 5 do not receive any oral health care each year.

Areas for Leadership (continued from pg 1)

Focus Area: Community Education

Fear and misunderstanding about oral health must be eliminated. The benefits of preventive oral health cannot be effectively implemented without public understanding and support.

Focus Area: Children with Special Health Care Needs

One in four parents of a child with special health care needs claim their child is in need of dental care. Twenty-nine percent of children in Louisiana have some form of disability. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that dentists treat patients with disabilities on the same basis as they treat patients without disabilities. Often dental students and dentists are inadequately prepared to treat patients with disabilities who often exhibit more severe forms of dental problems, have complicated medical histories, and can require special accommodations and scheduling.

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A Policy Brief (A project of Agenda for Children and the Oral Health Program, Office of Public Health, Department of Health and Hospitals)