

Medi-Cal Dental Program

Description of Study

The Little Hoover Commission is examining California's Denti-Cal program, a Medi-Cal affiliate that provides dental care for low-income Californians, including approximately five million children under 21. This review was requested by Senator and Dr. Richard Pan in an [April 6, 2015, request letter](#) to the Commission. Dr. Pan contended that persistent Denti-Cal shortcomings put its beneficiaries at higher risk of dental disease.

The Commission will specifically examine the administrative structure of the Denti-Cal program – a division of the California Department of Health Care Services – and explore potential improvements to produce better outcomes for beneficiaries. A December 2014 audit by the California State Auditor reported continuing weaknesses in the program that discourage dentists from participating and discourage parents from taking their children to dentists who do participate. The audit reported that 56 percent of children eligible for dental care through the Denti-Cal program do not go to its participating dentists. This is partly due to having few options, the audit reported. The audit cited five California counties with no participating dentists, 11 counties where participating dentists aren't taking new patients and 16 counties without enough participating dentists for their populations.

Dental care providers have told the Legislature they avoid participating in the program because the state's reimbursement rate falls significantly below the cost of providing care. The California State Auditor reported that the state last increased its reimbursement rates in the 2000-01 fiscal year and implemented a 10 percent cut in the rates in September 2013. The Governor and Legislature rescinded the cut in the 2015-16 state budget that went into effect July 1, 2015. Nonetheless, dental care providers have said that inadequate reimbursement, when combined with cumbersome state administrative requirements, continues to make participating in the state program unattractive to them as small business operators.

Anecdotal evidence, meanwhile, suggests that some participating dentists perform unnecessary services on Denti-Cal patients to make participation more financially viable.

Research by health advocates indicates that the dental problems experienced by many low-income California adults and children are largely preventable, and that children with dental problems or missing teeth are more likely to miss school and fall behind their peers in the short term and beyond.

As part of its study, the Commission will explore potential improvements to make the Denti-Cal program easier to use and more attractive and viable for providers. It also will examine Medicaid dental programs in other states and examine improvements that have reduced so-called "red tape" and increased the number of providers.

If you would like more information regarding this study, please contact project manager Jim Wasserman at jim.wasserman@lhc.ca.gov or at 916-445-2125. To be notified electronically of meetings, events, or even when the report is complete, please send a request to littlehoover@lhc.ca.gov.

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