315 Patients a Day Seek Dental Treatment in Florida's Hospital Emergency Rooms
One-Third of the Cost Charged to Medicaid

Lake Worth, Fla. – *All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth* may be a charming holiday jingle, but for an increasing number of Floridians the condition of their oral health is far from cute.

An analysis commissioned by the Florida Public Health Institute and conducted by the Health Council of Southeast Florida found more than 115,000 hospital emergency room visits in 2010 for treatment of conditions considered avoidable with proper preventive and restorative dental care. Total charges exceeded $88 million.

Reviewing the Florida Agency for Healthcare Administration's Emergency Department Database for the past three years, 2008 to 2010, FPHI also found the number of patients seeking emergency room dental care reached 115,696 from 105,892 in 2008, while costs grew to $88.8 million from $66.8 million.

The number of children receiving ER dental care has climbed to 15,528 in 2010 from 14,603 in 2008. FPHI Executive Director and Chair of the Florida Oral Health Coalition Claude Earl Fox, MD, MPH, said: "We're looking at 42 kids a day – two elementary school classrooms – visiting an ER for dental treatments on average per day."

Oral Health Florida is a broad-based statewide coalition dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of preventive dental care and increasing access to care for all Floridians. It is housed within FPHI, which manages the coalition.

Though spending increased across all categories of payors, the most dramatic increases were to Medicaid where the number of patients grew to 40,430 in 2010 from 28,875 in 2008. Medicaid charges climbed to $29.7 million in 2010 from $16.2 million in 2008.

Dr. Fox said FPHI will continue to analyze the data but its initial review suggests lack of access to preventive and restorative dental services is responsible for the high rates of ER patients. Medicaid does not cover such dental services for adults and many private dental practices will not accept Medicaid patients due to low reimbursement rates.

"We can see from the data that most visits are occurring during regular business hours," Dr. Fox said. "This means patients either have no way to pay, parents cannot find a dentist who will accept the Medicaid reimbursement rate or don't have the transportation necessary to reach one, or patients have no access to a public clinic."

Florida Dental Hygiene Association Executive Director Tami Miller, RDH, BS, said the Florida Legislature's decision in the 2011 Session to allow dental hygienists to offer preventive services without the supervision of a dentist in safety net settings is: "An important public policy solution to increasing access to much needed preventive care and turning off the tide of dental disease."

The largest category is those patients who pay out of pocket for their ER visit. The number of such patients reached 49,435 in 2010, from 48,515 in 2008, after a 2009 peak of 50,014 at the height of the recession. Hospital charges in this category reached $35.3 million in 2010.

Poor oral health has been linked to increased risk of heart disease and premature birth and may make blood sugar levels more difficult to control for those with diabetes. In children, tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood infectious disease – five times more common than asthma – and is entirely preventable. Nationally, children miss more than 52 million school hours each year due to dental disease.

"This is a really unfortunate situation," said Oral Health Florida Leadership Council Vice-Chair Frank Catalanotto, DMD, a professor and Chair of the Department of Community Dentistry and Behavioral Science at the University of Florida College of Dentistry. "Hospital emergency rooms are one of the most expensive sources of care and are typically not staffed and equipped to provide dental care.

"This means patients may only receive treatment for their symptoms, such as an antibiotic for an infection, without treating the source of the problem," Dr. Catalanotto said. "When they complete the course of antibiotics we see them back in the ER when the infection returns."

Dr. Fox said FPHI and Oral Health Florida have endorsed a set of policy solutions to stem the increasing use of hospital emergency rooms for dental care, including:

- Expanding preventive services by dental hygienists,
- Supporting and expanding county health department dental services,
- Working toward 100 percent community water fluoridation,
- Expanding pre-school and school-based preventive dental services in high-risk communities,
- Increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for preventive and restorative dental care, and
- Cover routine dental services for adults under Medicaid.

Dr. Cesar Sabates, President of the Florida Dental Association, said the FDA is committed to increasing access to care.

"The FDA has been working in partnership with the legislature on access to care," Dr. Sabates said. "Our joint efforts, in tandem with legislative support, resulted in an increase in Medicaid funds and a change in statute allowing hygienists to initiate certain services in health access settings.

"It is our hope," he said, "data such as this will be used to continue increasing access to care to the underserved population."

Oral Health Florida supports formation of, and the work of, county and regional oral health coalitions and encourages those interested in getting involved to visit www.oralhealthflorida.com.

About the Florida Public Health Institute
The Florida Public Health Institute (FPHI), a free standing private non-profit organization, is currently funded by six regional and national foundations and/or organizations. The mission of the Institute is to "advance the knowledge and practice of public health to promote, protect and improve the health of all." FPHI accomplishes this by promoting improvements in health through health education, health policy, evaluating the health workforce, and applied research. Research on the ER data was supported through a grant from the DentaQuest Foundation.

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