

The Issue

Reduce health care costs and improve patient care by treating dental disease in the dental practice instead of the ER



There are more than 2 million visits every year to hospital emergency rooms for dental pain.

Most emergency rooms (ER) do not have dentists on staff to provide dental treatment so patients are typically prescribed painkillers or antibiotics. This does not treat the underlying cause of the problem, and 39% of these patients return to the ER.

Studies have shown that the uninsured and Medicaid patients seek dental care in the ER more frequently than those with insurance. Women ages 21 to 34 are the highest users of ERs for dental problems.

As states cut adult dental Medicaid benefits in an attempt to reduce healthcare costs, these costs are simply shifted to the ER to provide palliative care for preventable dental conditions. Visits to the ER for dental pain are costly and can range from \$400 to \$1,500 compared to a \$90 to \$200 visit to a dentist. The most extreme cases of untreated dental infections have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in hospitalization and some have tragically ended in needless death.



There are solutions available now to:

- Treat the cause of dental pain instead of the symptoms
- Decrease costly, preventable dental visits to the ER
- Decrease overuse of painkillers for dental pain
- Improve access to dental care for underserved patients

Dr. Jane Grover, Director,
Council on Access, Prevention
and Interprofessional Relations at
groverj@ada.org or 312.440.2751

Action for
DENTAL HEALTH →

ADA American Dental Association®

Are dental patients in your state seeking care in the ER?

Florida

More than 115,000 hospital ER visits for dental problems in 2010.

Georgia

60,000 emergency hospital visits for non-traumatic dental problems or other oral health issues cost more than \$23 million in 2007.

Maine

Dental-related visits to the ER accounted for more than 40 percent of visits by adults on Medicaid.

Washington

Dental disorders are the most common primary diagnosis for ER visits for the uninsured costing more than \$3 million, according to a 2010 study.

California

The number of ER visits for preventable dental conditions is growing at a faster rate than the state's population.

The Issue

Reduce health care costs and improve patient care by treating dental disease in the dental practice instead of the ER

Solutions at the Local Level

Michigan: ER visits for dental pain decreased by 72%

In Calhoun County, a unique partnership between local dentists, community leaders and low-income residents is revolutionizing access to dental care. Patients who demonstrate financial need are referred to volunteer dentists from several sources, including hospital emergency rooms. Volunteer dentists provide treatment to the patients in their own offices. As payment, patients provide community service to local nonprofit organizations.

- ER visits for dental pain have decreased by 72% over 5 years and repeat visits have been nearly eliminated
- Local hospital has saved \$6 million in 4.5 years
- More than 43,000 hours of volunteer service have been contributed to the community
- 3,024 patients have been treated

Washington: Dentistry and medicine join forces to treat the uninsured

Swedish Medical Center in Seattle experienced an increase in ER visits for dental pain following severe cuts in adult dental Medicaid. Working with state and local dental societies, the hospital was able to reduce preventable visits to the ER by providing complex tooth extractions on-site to patients who are unable to receive care through the dental safety net. Volunteer dentists are recruited by the local dental society.

- Recognized by the Health Resources and Services Administration as a best practice for referring dental patients from the ER
- 380 patients were treated by more than 30 volunteer dentists in the first year
- An estimated 1,000 patients will be treated by 60 volunteer dentists in the second year

Maine: Up to 70% reduction in ER visits for dental pain in some hospitals

In Maine, a simple model to use the dental workforce more efficiently gets big results. Every patient who presents to the ER with dental pain receives one pre-prescription for painkillers and antibiotics and a referral to a local clinic or oral surgeon. The goal is to eliminate visits to the ER for the same problem.

The program's organizers report that ER visits for dental pain and infection at some participating hospitals have been reduced by as much as 70 percent, with the potential to save the state millions in Medicaid dollars. The pilot program, which began with 11 hospitals, is expected to expand to all 32 hospitals in Maine.

Updated August 2013

Virginia: In-hospital dental clinic significantly improves patient care

A pilot program to refer patients with dental pain from the ER to an urgent dental care clinic located in the hospital resulted in the following outcomes:

- Dental-related problems managed in the ER decreased by 52%
- Dental patients with repeat visits to the ER decreased by 66%

2 million

The approximate number of visits every year to hospital emergency rooms for dental pain.