

May 6, 2021

Marcella Nunez-Smith, MD
Chair
COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Office of Minority Health
Tower Oaks Building
1101 Wootton Parkway
Suite 100
Rockville, MD 20852

Dear Dr. Nunez-Smith:

Thank you for your leadership of the COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force. On behalf of the 162,000 members of the American Dental Association (ADA), we are writing to urge you to include an agenda item on how oral health has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic during the next meeting of the Task Force.

In the spring of 2020, the ADA recommended that dentists close their offices to all but urgent and emergency procedures in order to preserve personal protective equipment (PPE). This affected access to care. For example, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) found that, compared to the same time period in 2019, there were 69 percent fewer dental services between March and May 2020 for children enrolled in Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).¹ These children, who come from low-income families and/or have special health care needs, faced oral health disparities before the pandemic. A lack of oral health care during COVID-19 exacerbated these disparities, as small and preventable problems became much more serious. Although the number of dental visits started to increase in July, it is still below prior years' rates.

It is critically important that the Task Force study how COVID-19 affected oral health for both children and adults. More data is needed, including on how race, income, type of dental insurance coverage, and geographic location impacted oral health disparities. Collecting and analyzing this information will help prevent future inequities. Many of the issues discussed during the April 30 meeting of the Task Force in regards to substance use disorders also apply to oral health, including the use of disaggregating data, oversampling among smaller populations in public health surveillance systems, better data collection on social determinants of health, making data more accessible, and more. The ADA looks forward to the Task Force holding an in-depth discussion on oral health similar to the one on substance use disorders.

Thank you again. Should you have questions or want more information, please contact Ms. Roxanne Yaghoubi at yaghoubir@ada.org.

¹ Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "CMS Issues Urgent Call to Action Following Drastic Decline in Care for Children in Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program Due to COVID-19 Pandemic," September 23, 2020, <https://www.cms.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cms-issues-urgent-call-action-following-drastic-decline-care-children-medicare-and-childrens-health>.

May 6, 2021
Page 2

Sincerely,

Daniel J. Klemmedson, D.D.S., M.D.
President

Kathleen T. O'Loughlin, D.M.D., M.P.H.
Executive Director

DJK:KTO:ry