

October 31, 2011

Honorable Kathleen Sebelius
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Building
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Sebelius:

The American Dental Association and its 156,000 member dentists would like to commend you for including oral health among the leading health indicators (LHIs) used to evaluate the nation's fundamental progress in achieving health promotion and disease prevention objectives outlined in Healthy People 2020.

The ADA is committed to working with all stakeholders to repair and expand the oral health safety net and your recognition that oral health should be included as an LHI will help in that effort because the government and private organizations use LHIs when considering how to prioritize health resources. With recent research showing a significant connection between oral health and systemic health, spending on dental care, prevention and education can save money over the long run.

Developing a comprehensive approach to health education and promotion, care coordination, and effective prevention is critical to improving the oral health of the underserved. This approach will hinge on a number of principles:

- **Prevention is essential.** *Simple, low-cost measures like sealing kids' teeth, fluoridating municipal water supplies, educating families about taking charge of their own oral health, expanding the number of health professionals capable of assessing a child's oral health, and linking dental and medical homes will pay for themselves many times over.*
- **Everyone deserves a dentist.** *Creating a separate tier of care for underserved populations will sap resources from solutions that already work, and will do comparatively little to improve the oral health of those in greatest need. The existing system needs to be extended to more people.*
- **Coordination is critical.** *Too many government and government-administered programs suffer from a failure to manage and exchange information about best practices for safety net operations. Technology and human capital are available to remedy this. Political will is key to better leveraging these resources.*
- **Public-private collaboration works.** *Private practice dentists deliver the hands-on care to most of the population, regardless of payment mechanism. Public health and assistance programs can make it easier for dentists to deliver care by simplifying their administration and reducing red tape.*
- **Silence is the enemy.** *Let's take the "silent" out of "silent epidemic." Virtually every shortcoming in the safety net has at its root a failure to understand or value oral health. When people, whether lawmakers, the media or the general public, learn about oral health and the consequences of oral disease, their attitudes and priorities change. Awareness is on the rise, but we have far to go before Americans know enough to make the personal and policy decisions that ultimately will create a real safety net, one that prevents oral disease and restores oral health in people who seek healthier and more productive lives.*

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We look forward to working with HHS to advance the nation's oral health and the goals outlined in Healthy People 2020. If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact Mr. Robert J. Burns at 202-789-5176 or burnsr@ada.org

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "William R. Calnon".

William R. Calnon, D.D.S.
President
American Dental Association