



# Update

JUNE 2011

A legislator's guide to oral health care issues, provided by the members of the Pennsylvania Dental Association

Dentists  
Providing  
Access to  
Dental Care  
in  
Pennsylvania

## THE PROBLEM

The Problem

*Individuals with disabilities have enough challenges to face. Getting proper dental care shouldn't be another. Yet for a community that already struggles for acceptance, accessing dental care is a growing problem with severe consequences: their overall health, basic life functions, potential for employment and self-esteem are all jeopardized. Dental care now represents a major health concern for people with disabilities. – Achieva*

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

The Problem	pg. 1
Who We Are	pg. 2
The Solution	pg. 2
5 Reasons to Support HB 532	pg. 3
Contact Us	pg. 3

**F**or young children and special needs patients of any age, visiting the dentist is often a difficult experience. These individuals are susceptible to involuntary movements that can cause serious injury when they occur while sharp instruments are in their mouths. Being placed under general anesthesia is often the only way they receive the dental treatment they need. Unfortunately, general anesthesia coverage is often excluded from medical plans and is not covered under dental plans at all.

Pennsylvania's Medical Assistance plan already covers this procedure for patients of any age. However, many private insurers contend that the administration of general anesthesia for dental treatment is not medically necessary and deny coverage, whether it is to be administered in a hospital or dental office setting. The reality is that very few can afford the fees associated with administering general anesthesia and their dental problems are left untreated. Denying general anesthesia coverage is tantamount to denying care altogether.

Though some insurers do not acknowledge the medical necessity of dental care, the fact that oral health is an integral component of overall health is undisputable. The oral cavity acts as gateway to the rest of the body. Having bad oral health often leads to more significant health problems overall. This is especially true for special needs patients and for those children whose lack of care will set the course for the rest of their lives.

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According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, “for some infants, children, adolescents and persons with special health care needs, treatment under sedation/general anesthesia in a hospital, outpatient facility or dental office or clinic represents the only appropriate method to delivery necessary dental care.” It is necessary for providing safe and quality dental care with compassion.

Individuals with special needs pose a unique challenge. They often have complex medical conditions, take multiple medications and have difficulty managing daily routines and communication. This makes basic oral hygiene and treatment in a dental office difficult, if not impossible.

Patients’ total health is compromised when they have dental disease and are unable to maintain proper nutrition because of an inability to eat. The consequences of neglecting these problems are severe: they include infections, illness through low-grade fevers, facial swelling and potentially life-threatening medical complications. This results in an exponential increase in health care expenses for the patient and all policyholders.

According to Achieva, an advocacy group representing individuals with special needs, approximately 221,000 children and adults are developmentally disabled. An additional 2,111,771 have other disabilities. While some find general anesthesia coverage under Medical Assistance and CHIP, this same coverage is denied to the privately insured. There are too many children and adults who go without the care they need because it is unaffordable. While some may argue that insurers are trying to contain escalating health care costs, PDA believes that insurance policyholders and taxpayers can ill afford the more significant costs of treating problems that have developed from lack of early care.

# THE SOLUTION

*The Solution*

**P**DA supports House Bill 532, the Children’s and Special Needs Patients’ Access to Quality Dental Care Act, as a measure that will end the discriminatory practice by some insurers to deny general anesthesia coverage. Rep. Stan Saylor is prime sponsor of this legislation and a champion for improving the oral health of all Pennsylvanians. HB 532 is before the House Insurance Committee for consideration; please ask your colleagues for their support moving this bill out of committee.

HB 532 requires insurers to cover all associated expenses with administering general anesthesia, when needed to provide dental care to children seven years of age and younger and special needs patients. The insurers use a familiar tactic when trying to stall or kill this legislation by saying that this benefit should fall under dental plans. That won’t work for two reasons: administering general anesthesia is a medical procedure and patients simply do not have sufficient dental benefits to absorb the addition of general anesthesia costs with regular dental procedures.

Insurers also cite an increase to insurance premiums should they be required to cover general anesthesia patients. But the number of patients impacted is relatively small since most of Pennsylvania’s at-risk patients are covered under Medical Assistance and CHIP. Under HB 532, eligible patients include those seven years of age and younger or developmentally disabled for whom a successful result can only be achieved when general anesthesia is administered.

It is important for this coverage to apply in a dental office or hospital setting. Several hundred dentists have permits to administer general anesthesia; allowing for coverage of the treatment in the dental office eliminates unnecessary hospital utilization. It is estimated that 75 percent of disabled patients may still be treated in a typical dental office as long as they receive the appropriate level of sedation. There is a significant savings to the patient, other policyholders and taxpayers when hospitalization can be avoided.

## Who We Are

The Pennsylvania Dental Association (PDA), comprised of more than 5,500 actively practicing and retired dentists, is proud of its efforts to improve Pennsylvanians’ oral health.

PDA’s goals are to promote optimal dental care for the public, improve the availability of dental care for all citizens, speak on behalf of the public’s dental health interests before government entities and educate the public about preventing oral disease and promoting good oral health.

This edition of the Oral Health Update is a plea to legislators and the Governor’s Administration to pass legislation that will improve access to dental care for our most vulnerable patients. HB 532 would ensure anesthesia coverage for those patients who require sedation in order to receive dental treatment. Eligible patients include children seven years of age and younger with severe anxiety or behavioral problems, and special needs patients of any age with physical or mental disabilities. They face so many challenges in their daily lives, but accessing dental care should not be one of them.



# Reasons to Support HB 532

- 1** Denial of this medical benefit effectively eliminates the option of receiving necessary dental care for most families. Lack of coverage frequently represents such a financial burden to families that treatment of serious dental disease is denied for the patient.
- 2** There is a minimal fiscal impact for providing this benefit. In other states, premiums have risen by a mere few cents or dollars.
- 3** Delaying or denying dental care can cause potentially life-threatening medical complications for the patient. Lack of appropriate and timely care will result in more costs to the patient, and potentially the taxpayer.
- 4** The value of access to quality dental care can only be measured when understanding that oral health is an integral component of overall health. The consequences of neglecting dental problems include infections, illness through low-grade fevers and facial swelling that inhibits proper nutrition.
- 5** Thirty-one other states already recognize the need to provide this option when treating vulnerable patients by requiring insurers to cover the expenses of general anesthesia.

## Contact Us

PDA prides itself on being Pennsylvania's premier dental organization and the leading authority on all dental issues. Please contact PDA's government relations staff at [mss@padental.org](mailto:mss@padental.org), or (717) 234-5941, for more information about our advocacy goals. You can also contact PDA's government relations consultants, Mark Singel and Peg Moyer of The Winter Group, at (717) 909-9561. Visit [www.padental.org](http://www.padental.org) to find out more about us and the services our members provide to your constituents!