

News

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Medicaid to pay dentists more

By **Eric Eyre**
Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W. Va. - For the first time in eight years, the state Medicaid office plans to raise reimbursement fees paid to dentists, a move expected to increase the number of low-income West Virginians who receive dental treatment.

Last week, the state Medicaid Fund Advisory Council unanimously approved the state's plan to ask the federal Center of Medicare and Medicaid Services for permission to change reimbursement rates for dentists.

The fee increase will mostly affect children, as Medicaid will only pay for emergency tooth extractions for adults ages 19 and older in West Virginia.

Only about one of every three West Virginia kids with Medicaid benefits saw a dentist last year. Medicaid covers about 152,000 children across the state.

Dentists and state Medicaid officials believe higher fees will save the state money in the long run. Fewer Medicaid patients with painful toothaches and abscesses will seek costly care in hospital emergency rooms if more dentists are treating more low-income people.

"There will be improved access for patients," said Richard Stevens, executive director of the West Virginia Dental Association. "A person can have a dangerous abscess, and they can go to the emergency room, but all they're going to get is a prescription for an antibiotic and pain medication."

The amount of the fee increases and what dental services would be reimbursed at higher rates are still being negotiated.

The state Dental Association has recommended that oral surgery fees be increased significantly.

Only about 40 percent of oral surgeons in West Virginia accept patients with Medicaid benefits, according to a 2007 survey. Oral surgeons typically extract teeth after sedating patients.

The state raised reimbursement fees for tooth fillings and cleanings in 2001, but reimbursement rates for emergency extractions haven't been increased since 1992.

West Virginia now pays dentists and oral surgeons \$44 to extract a tooth. Dentists in the surrounding south Atlantic region receive \$193 on average, according to an American Dental Association survey.

In late 2007, a legislative committee examining oral health care recommended a rate hike.

About 40 oral surgeons work in West Virginia. Pediatric dentists also perform oral surgery on children.

Stevens said Medicaid recipients sometimes call his office in search of an oral surgeon, but many must wait up to six months for an appointment.

Patients who can't get in to see an oral surgeon often must put off other dental work, Stevens said.

"We've experienced a lack of access to oral surgery," he said. "Some oral surgeons have ceased providing services or they've limited the number of Medicaid patients they are treating."

It's especially difficult to find an oral surgeon who accepts Medicaid patients in Southern West Virginia where dental health problems are rampant, said Dr. Byron Black, who co-owns Mountain State Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons in Charleston.

"The southern part of the state is just not being served," Black said. "There's just not access."

The state Dental Association also has suggested the Medicaid office reimburse

dentists for additional services provided to infants and toddlers.

"Not all fees are going to be increased," Stevens said. "Our suggestion is to increase the fees where the need is the greatest. I consider our recommendations to be financially responsible."

Medicaid officials expect federal officials to approve West Virginia's request to raise dental reimbursement fees within the next two months.

"This will allow us to modify our state Medicaid plan," said Shannon Landrum, a state Medicaid spokeswoman. "We don't want our dentists losing money when they treat Medicaid patients."

Reach Eric Eyre at erice...@wvgazette.com or 348-4869.