

Governor, don't cut access to dental health

By Dr. Lee Jess and Dr. Mike Helgeson

There are more than 20,000 hospital emergency room visits for dental care each year in Minnesota. Last year, inappropriate emergency room visits at Hennepin County Medical Center for dental problems cost HCMC a stunning \$2.6 million in medical billings. That number could increase as a result of cuts to the state dental care program in this year's budget.

The Minnesota Dental Association and Apple Tree Dental — a major dental care provider to people with special needs — stand united against the governor using the unallotment process to cut critical state dental programs as a short-term means of solving the state's budget gaps. Cutting funding for the adult dental care program, the Critical Access Dental Provider Program and those dentists who treat the largest numbers of underserved patients will severely damage the oral health care infrastructure in Minnesota.

Without these programs, many more Minnesotans will be forced to visit emergency rooms for dental problems rather than their local dentist's office. Emergency rooms are not only costlier to use, they are not set up to treat dental disease and most do not even have dentists or oral surgeons on duty. Costs to hospitals and the state will dramatically increase if we deny people the option to visit a dentist's office where the care is less costly and more comprehensive.

As members of the Dental Access Alliance, an organization made up of dentists, providers and advocates, we have worked together to find \$18 million in oral health cuts totaling about 20 percent of the state's total dental spending. This is on top of the millions in pro-bono and uncompensated care that dentists and clinics around Minnesota provide every year. Any further cuts would be devastating.

Gov. Pawlenty, do not sacrifice oral health care. Further cuts will only increase the state's health care costs over time and decrease access to dental care for rural, low-income and disabled populations. At a time when an increasing number of people are not able to afford care, funding for these essential programs must be preserved.

We understand that Minnesota's economy is struggling and that sacrifices have to be made by everyone. But Minnesota is consistently ranked as one of the healthiest states in the nation for a reason — we make sure that as many of us as possible have access to quality medical and dental care.

Oral health influences our overall health and well-being. Cutting the eligibility and the dental safety net for thousands of Minnesotans now will only cost us more in the future.

Dr. Lee Jess is president of the Minnesota Dental Association who practices in Grand Rapids. Dr. Mike Helgeson is CEO of Apple Tree Dental, a Minneapolis non-profit organization whose mission is to improve the oral health of people with special dental access needs.

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