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Medicaid Fluoride Varnish Pilot Project Targets Infants and Toddlers in Chaves County

Santa Fe, New Mexico – The Human Services Department’s (HSD) Medicaid’s Dental Services is working to address unmet dental needs of infants and toddlers receiving health care through Medicaid and the Medicaid Fluoride Varnish Pilot is one project helping to reach that goal.

Beginning this month, primary care providers in Chaves County began offering dental varnish applications as a preventive care service during well child checks. “So far, seven pediatricians have received training from local dentists and completed online training,” said Carolyn Ingram HSD’s Medical Assistance Division Director. “Fluoride varnish will be applied to every child from age six months (or first tooth eruption) up to the age of three through this project.” Primary care providers could administer about 20 varnish applications each day.

The Medicaid Fluoride Varnish Pilot Project is based on a popular program in North Carolina *Into the Mouths of Babes*. This program was instrumental in early detection of Early Childhood Caries, which is characterized by fast moving decay that can destroy a child’s adult teeth as they emerge.

Many parents have misconceptions that early visits to the dentist don’t do much good because infants do not have any teeth and toddlers will lose their baby teeth anyway. When reality is cavity-causing bacteria can be established in an infant’s mouth by the time his or her first tooth erupts – between nine months and one year of age.

The Fluoride Varnish Pilot Project hopes to change the misconceptions into improved overall health for New Mexico’s children. “Not only are healthy baby teeth crucial for children to make the transition from milk to solid food, but also for developing speech and for the proper emergence of permanent teeth,” said Britt Catron, Medicaid’s Dental Services Manager. “Additionally, there is great cost and morbidity associated with dental reconstruction in toddlers.”

Data trends are beginning to demonstrate that Medicaid-covered children receiving this procedure have fewer caries-related treatments in dental offices (as much as 39 percent reduction in care) than enrolled children not having preventive services.

Fluoride varnish offers several advantages over other professionally applied fluorides: “Children easily tolerate it, it can be swabbed directly on the teeth in less than three minutes and sets within a minute of contact with saliva, it’s safe and poses less risk of an adverse reaction because only a small amount is used and less is swallowed and it can be applied in any setting and does not require the use of dental equipment or instruments, said Catron.”

Karen L Carson MD, FAAP of BCA Medical Associates, in Roswell, said, “The dental varnish plan was presented by the NM Pediatric Society at a council meeting in November 2007 after NM Pediatricians showed interest in national efforts.”. The NM Pediatric Council serves as an intermediary between physicians, state health officials and health insurance company representatives – including the Medicaid program.

There are 457,000 people in NM receiving health care through Medicaid, including 307,000 children. In Chaves County, 18,790 people are receiving health care through Medicaid, including 12,587 children.

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