

# Dental Therapy: Cost Savings to Wisconsin



## *Can Dental Therapists Save Wisconsin Unnecessary Spending in Medicaid?*

*Yes, by reducing the number of costly visits to the ER for preventable dental conditions because more people would have access to routine care.*

When patients can't get care they go to the ER. In 2015 Wisconsin hospitals clocked more than 41,000 emergency department (ED) visits for which a preventable dental condition was the primary or secondary diagnosis; 56 percent of such visits were paid for by Medicaid.<sup>i</sup> If accounting for only primary diagnosis visits (33,133), at an average cost of \$749 per visit (in 2012), this represents **nearly \$25 million in hospital costs.**<sup>ii</sup>

Why are Medicaid beneficiaries going to the ED when they have dental coverage? Most dentists won't accept Medicaid patients, mainly due to low reimbursement rates. In 2014 only 37 % of Wisconsin dentists were enrolled in Medicaid. Only 30% of dentists saw at least one fee- for- service patient; 17% saw more than 25 fee-for-service patients.

Dental therapists command lower salaries than dentists, and for practices that employ them, they lower the cost of delivering care to patients. This makes accepting Medicaid's discounted payment rates more feasible for a dental practice. One private dentist who hired a dental therapist in Minnesota served an additional 200 Medicaid patients and generated a profit of \$24,000 in her first year of employment.<sup>iii</sup>

## *Can Dental Therapists lower dental care costs for privately insured Wisconsinites?*

*Yes. Practices that employ dental therapists will have more of an incentive to join PPO networks and charge less to network members than out-of-network members.*

Dentists that employ dental therapists are better positioned to join dental plan preferred provider networks, which most often offer a reimbursement rate that is lower than dentists' fees, and require that dentists pass these lower fees onto their patients. Dental therapists lower labor costs for dental practices, which makes it more feasible for practices to accept discounted payment rates from plans.

## *Can Dental Therapists lower dental care costs for low-income uninsured Wisconsinites?*

*Yes, by helping community health centers provide more free or low-cost dental care to the low-income uninsured. In fact, this is already happening in Minnesota.*

Low-income adults without dental insurance often seek care in federally-funded community health centers, where they can receive free or low-cost dental care. Dental therapists' salaries are substantially lower than that of dentists. Community health centers can use these labor cost savings to provide free or low-cost care to more low-income uninsured patients. In fact, a recent state evaluation of dental therapists in Minnesota found that nonprofit clinics employing dental therapists are doing this.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Wisconsin Hospital Association, *WHA Testifies in Favor of Bill to Increase Access to Dental Services*, April 25, 2017, The Valued Voice. Available at [http://www.wha.org/Data/Sites/1/pubarchive/vv\\_physician\\_edition/vv-physicianedition-4-5-2017.pdf](http://www.wha.org/Data/Sites/1/pubarchive/vv_physician_edition/vv-physicianedition-4-5-2017.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Wall T, Vujcic M. Emergency department use for dental conditions continues to increase. Health Policy Institute Research Brief. American Dental Association. April 2015. Available from: [http://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Science%20and%20Research/HPI/Files/HPIBrief\\_0415\\_2.ashx](http://www.ada.org/~media/ADA/Science%20and%20Research/HPI/Files/HPIBrief_0415_2.ashx)

<sup>iii</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts. Expanding the Dental Team: Studies of Two Private Practices. February 2014. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2014/02/12/expanding-the-dental-team>.

<sup>iv</sup> Minnesota Department of Health and Minnesota Board of Dentistry, Early Impacts of Dental Therapists in Minnesota (February, 2014). Available at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/orhpc/workforce/dt/dtlegisrpt.pdf>