



Statement

of

Access to Baby and Child Dentistry

Presented by

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“Medicaid’s Efforts to Reform since the Preventable Death of Deamonte Driver: a Progress Report”

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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for the invitation to testify today.

My name is Dr. Joel Berg, and I am the Lloyd and Kay Chapman Chair for Oral Health in the Department of Pediatric Dentistry at the University of Washington, Dental Director at Seattle Children’s Hospital, as well as Secretary-Treasurer of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. I am a practicing pediatric dentist and I care for a large number of Medicaid eligible children. I am honored to appear before you today to represent and to share the success of Washington State’s “Access to Baby and Child Dentistry” Program, or “ABCD.”

The goal of ABCD is to expand access to oral health services by Medicaid-eligible children ages birth through the 6th birthday. More than a dozen nationally published articles have clearly demonstrated that early prevention reduces future dental care costs, and that ABCD is an effective, cost-saving method of improving the oral health status of Medicaid-enrolled young children. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry and Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors have both named ABCD as a best practice, and the Program continues to receive awards and recognition from health organizations in Washington State and across the country.

Please allow me explain how ABCD was formed and how it works. The first ABCD Program was established in 1995 in Spokane, Washington as a collaborative effort between the public and private sectors. The community agreed that something needed to be done to address the severe lack of dental access among high-risk, low-income preschool children.

ABCD Programs are locally administered by a health jurisdiction or community agency that contracts with the local health department. The administrator then works with an identified ABCD “Dental Champion,” who is a leading pediatric dentist (or a general dentist in areas without pediatric dental coverage) selected and trained by the University of Washington to identify, recruit, train and mentor other local general dentists. ABCD encourages general dental offices, not just pediatric dental practices, to provide a positive dental experience and a dental home by age 1. The local dental society, participating ABCD dentists, the health department, and outreach agencies work together to identify and refer eligible clients. The ABCD Program is embedded in many local Head Start; Early Head Start, now both under AAPD leadership; and Women, Infant and Children (WIC) Nutrition programs, which enroll and orient their clients, and at the same time, help achieve the agencies’ client oral health objectives.

In Washington State, ABCD is a collaborative effort of Washington Dental Service Foundation, the University of Washington School of Dentistry, the Department of Social and Health Services, the Washington State Dental Association, the Department of Health, local dental societies, and local health jurisdictions.

ABCD certified dentists receive enhanced Medicaid reimbursement for selected procedures for enrolled children. Dental front office staff receives training in communication and culturally appropriate follow-up with the client families, and the billing staff learns how to work with the Medicaid program. By scheduling patients appropriately and effectively using the auxiliary staff to assist families with oral health education components of the visits, the ABCD Program is productive and cost-effective.

With the growth of the ABCD Program, an increasing number of Washington physicians are now addressing oral health during well-child checks because ABCD-trained dentists serve as referral sites. Medicaid reimburses trained and certified primary care providers for delivering oral screenings, health education and fluoride varnish during well-child checks and referral to a dentist as needed.

Today, 31 of Washington’s 39 counties – more than 1,000 dentists – participate in ABCD, and several other states have expressed interest in adopting this successful Program. ABCD has more than doubled the number of young Medicaid children in Washington who are receiving dental care – from 40,000 to 107,000, a utilization increase from 21% to 39% in the last 10 years. In addition, these ABCD patients have improved health, as they are more likely to seek care before oral health problems arise.

The ABCD Program is reducing overall dental costs. Prevention is most cost-effective in infants during their first two years, and ABCD is making progress toward increasing the number of children who receive care before their second birthday: in 2008, nearly 22,000 children under age two, 18.7% of eligible children received dental services. When the Program was initiated in 1997, only 3% of eligible infants and toddlers received dental care.

While targeted enhanced reimbursements, for increased frequency of preventive intervention visits for young Medicaid children are extremely important, other elements must be present to ensure the success of ABCD. The Washington Dental Service Foundation coordinates the program at the state level and provides three year start-up grants to launch the program locally so that outreach to families, case management, support services for the dentists and other critical activities are included..

In the years ahead, the ABCD Program will be growing the use of risk assessment tools, as exciting technologies toward that end are emerging, increasing incentives for earlier intervention, and expanding partnerships to refer the highest risk, low-income children to a dentist as early in a child's life as possible.

We must combat the growing crisis of childhood dental disease and increase access to care for some of our country's most vulnerable patients. ABCD is a proven best practice that is working in Washington State. Thank you again for the opportunity to share this success, and we look forward to working with other states across the country to increase access to dental care.