

1st Look Program to target dental caries in young children

Infants and toddlers at high risk for serious dental problems will soon benefit from a collaborative effort aimed at preventing early childhood caries (ECC) in children covered by the Alabama Medicaid Agency.

Developed by the Agency in partnership with the state's pediatric dentists and pediatricians, the 1st Look Program is designed to reduce early childhood caries by encouraging primary care physicians to perform dental risk assessments, provide anticipatory guidance, apply fluoride varnish when indicated, and refer children to a dental home by age one. Children already seen by a dentist do not qualify for the 1st Look Program. Participating primary medical providers (PMPs) must first obtain certification by completing a Medicaid-approved training course. The 1st Look Program is scheduled to begin in January 2009.

"Early prevention of dental caries will ultimately result in improved oral health for high-risk Alabama children," said Medicaid Commissioner Carol Steckel. "This partnership between Patient 1st medical providers and the dental community is a win-win effort that will significantly impact the overall health and well-being of the children we serve."

Pediatric dentist Richard A. Simpson, DMD, of Tuscaloosa, has been instrumental in the collaborative effort, which has included representatives of the Alabama Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, the Alabama Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Alabama Dental Association, and the Alabama Medicaid Agency. Alabama will be the 23rd state to offer this type of program.

"1st Look Program goals are to improve awareness of early childhood caries, increase early prevention education, enlarge the dental provider referral base, and reduce the incidence of dental caries in Alabama children", Dr. Simpson said. The key components of the 1st Look Program involve doctors assessing the risk for dental disease during check-ups of their young patients, utilizing a modified AAPD Caries Risk Assessment Tool (CAT). The parent or other caregiver then receives preventive education and is instructed on the importance of establishing a dental home, ideally by age one. Infants deemed to be at "high risk" for ECC receive a fluoride varnish application and are referred to a Patient 1st care coordinator to assist in the dental referral process.

Dr. Simpson stated that "recent studies are beginning to show that the combination of primary care physicians well trained in oral health assessment, repeated fluoride varnish applications, and appropriate early referral to a dentist can effectively reduce the incidence of ECC and, ultimately, the number of costly restorative procedures performed on very young patients." He also noted that North Carolina, the first state to implement such a program some 10 years ago, has reported a 39 percent reduction in caries in the anterior teeth of young children.