

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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****Interviews can be arranged with local physicians, dentists and other experts. Dentists and physicians in your local area may also be available.**

February is . . .

Children's Dental Health Month

Declines in children's oral health prompts statewide campaign urging **“First dental screening by first birthday”**

SEATTLE — In observance of Children's Dental Health Month in February, dentists, physicians and oral health professionals are raising renewed concerns about increasing rates of oral disease among Washington's young children. This is an ideal time to deliver the message that baby teeth are important for a lifetime of good oral and overall health.

Washington Dental Service Foundation, along with Seattle Children's Hospital and Spokane's Sacred Heart Children's Hospital, have initiated an expanded effort to draw attention to the importance of baby teeth. They are urging parents to have their baby's teeth checked by a dentist or a physician by their first birthday.

“When it comes to health, we need to stop separating the mouth from the body. Baby teeth are essential for an infant who will soon be developing language skills and chewing food. Healthy baby teeth help ensure healthy permanent teeth and overall good health,” said Dr. Irene Hunter, a dentist in Olympia and Chair of Washington Dental Service Foundation.

Experts recommend that as soon as a baby's first tooth comes in, usually between six and 12 months of age, parents should have their baby's mouth checked. This advice was delivered recently in TV public service announcements and radio spots airing across the state. The campaign also includes materials for parents and a website for more information (KidsOralHealth.org).

In Washington, too many young children suffer from preventable dental disease. Already the most common chronic childhood disease in the U.S., disease rates among young children in Washington are increasing and in some cases, are higher than the national average. Particularly troublesome is the fact that the rate of dental disease has increased over the last 10 years. In 2005, 45 percent of low-income preschoolers in Washington were found to have dental decay compared to 38 percent in 1994.

Since 2002, experts including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, have recommended that children's teeth be screened no later than the first birthday. More needs to be done to ensure this important advice is delivered to parents because dental disease among very young children is becoming more prevalent in Washington.

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Dr. Russell Maier, a family physician, University of Washington professor and Board member of Washington Dental Service Foundation, said, "Oral health is an important part of overall health, and good oral health starts with baby teeth. If your baby's mouth isn't healthy, then your baby is not going to be healthy."

In an important new development, beginning just last year, primary care medical providers can now be reimbursed for providing oral health preventive services to Medicaid-eligible children. Washington Dental Service, the state's largest provider of dental coverage, also reimburses physicians for providing children's preventive oral health services for WDS members.

Screening teeth prior to age one is important. In addition to spotting potential problems early, it also provides an opportunity to provide tips to parents about how to take care of their baby's mouth. For example, many parents don't know how to clean their baby's teeth or that putting a baby to bed with a bottle of milk can lead to significant dental decay. Parents need basic information about protecting their child's oral health starting with baby teeth. They can get that information from a dentist and now, in many cases, also from their physician.

Medical organizations across that state are urging members to pay attention to the oral health of their patients. In an effort to improve the oral health of young children, pediatricians and family physicians are now being trained to screen, assess risk, educate families, apply fluoride varnish and refer those needing follow-up treatment to dentists. This approach is particularly promising because very young children usually see a physician more than eight times for well-child care by the time they are three years old. This is an opportune time to talk to parents about ways to protect their baby's oral health and the importance of healthy baby teeth.

"Dental disease can be prevented and it is important to start early. Prevention is simple, cost-effective and protects the health and future of our children." said Laura Smith, president and CEO of the Washington Dental Service Foundation. "Prevention saves money for families and taxpayers, and it is the right thing to do."

In addition to getting an oral health screening by the first birthday, there are some other common sense steps parents should follow to protect their child's baby teeth during the critical early years:

- Beginning at birth, wipe your baby's gums with a washcloth or piece of gauze after feeding.
- Brush your baby's teeth with a soft toothbrush as soon as you see the first tooth, usually around six months.
- Use a rice-sized amount of fluoridated toothpaste and try putting your child's head in your lap to make it easier to brush their teeth.
- Avoid constant snacking on sticky or starchy foods or sipping sweet liquids throughout the day.
- Choose healthy snacks such as cheese, fruits or vegetables. Avoid snacks that are sugary, starchy or sticky.
- If you put your baby to bed with a bottle, fill it with water.
- Ask your physician or dentist about fluoride varnish, a quick and effective way to help prevent cavities and even reverse early decay.

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About Washington Dental Service Foundation

Founded in 1985, Washington Dental Service Foundation is the state's largest foundation committed to improving oral health. The Foundation supports a variety of innovative oral health programs focused on preventing oral disease, expanding access to dental care and increasing awareness of the importance of oral health. Since its inception, the Foundation has contributed more than \$16 million in grants and scholarships. Washington Dental Service Foundation receives the majority of its funding from Washington Dental Service (WDS), a non-profit company, serving more than 2 million people throughout the state. For more information, visit www.DeltaDentalWA.com.