

Children's Wisconsin working to integrate oral health care into primary care settings across the state

Oral health is essential to overall health and well-being, however, unfortunately, accessing oral health care services can be challenging. Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin, an affiliate of Children's Wisconsin, has been working over the last several years to address access disparities by integrating oral health care into primary care settings.

Dental disease is one of the most common chronic childhood diseases and one of the top reasons why kids miss school. Untreated cavities impact the ability to eat, speak, sleep, socialize and learn often resulting in costly and preventable emergency room visits. Significant barriers to accessing care exist, especially for kids living in underserved areas and those with special needs. Nationally, Wisconsin ranks near the bottom in access to dental care for kids covered by Medicaid. Each year, more than 80,000 Wisconsin kids under age 5 who are covered by Medicaid visit a physician, but don't visit a dentist.

Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin is leading the effort to pioneer a Medical Dental Integration (MDI) care delivery model where dental hygienists are integrated into primary care appointments to provide early dental prevention and intervention services. In addition to the patient receiving their regular medical exam, the dental hygienist can provide screening, education, any appropriate in-office prevention and ensure the patient is connected to a dental home. Integrating a dental hygienist into the medical team increases the number of patients who receive oral health care, improves patient outcomes and reduces the cost of care. 11 health care systems and health care centers are involved in Wisconsin's MDI effort, including in the Fox Valley region. Through the MDI model, more than 17,000 patients have received oral health services. Dental hygienists shared that the opportunity to provide early intervention, education and address barriers to care have been most beneficial for families.

-Children's Wisconsin-Fox Valley