

## Dentistry focuses media on 'silent epidemic'

BY CRAIG PALMER

Washington—The American Dental Association invited congressional and media attention March 24 to “a silent epidemic of untreated dental disease” in stark severity among poor children.

“It is nothing short of a national disgrace,” ADA President Eugene Sekiguchi told a National Press Club newsmaker audience.

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## Epidemic

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“Thousands of children can’t eat or sleep properly; they can’t pay attention in school; they are ashamed to smile.” Dental disease early, severe and untreated “impedes their general development and they fail to thrive.”

Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho), who practiced dentistry 22 years before election to the U.S. Congress, joined the ADA president and Dr. James J. Crall of the UCLA School of Dentistry in a message to the media while dentists from across the country canvassed Capitol Hill with similar messages for their representatives and senators.

“Millions of Americans, children and adults, lack access to dental care in rural areas like Idaho and other areas,” Rep. Simpson told the national news media representatives. “It’s sad because dental disease is almost 100 percent inevitable and almost 100 percent curable. It’s particularly sad when that affects children. Thousands of dentists provide free and reduced care, and I applaud their efforts, but we need to do more.” He said he would support legislation to increase access to dental care in rural areas and restore dental residency funding.

Dr. Sekiguchi, ADA president, said the Association and its members “are committed to change through both advocacy and direct action.” The ADA represents more than 147,000 member dentists.

“In my experience, dentists are incredibly generous in volunteering their time and facilities to treat people for free,” he said. “But in the long run, dentists alone cannot solve the problem; no amount of charity can. Charity is not a health care system.”

Dr. Sekiguchi joined dentists from across the country in describing for the media and members of Congress the participation of 15,000 dentists in local Give Kids A Smile care last month for an estimated one million children who don’t get regular dental care.

“But the real story is what we couldn’t do,” the ADA president told the news media. “There are 24 million children enrolled in Medicaid; three quarters of them won’t see a dentist this year.”

Dr. Crall, UCLA pediatric dentistry professor and chair, pointed to improved access to care for poor children in certain states through private practice-public partnerships. Many state Medicaid programs are underfunded and unable to meet the needs of eligible children, he said. Federal law requires state Medicaid programs to provide dental screening, diagnosis and treatment services to Medicaid-eligible children.

The National Press Club newsmaker event, “Crisis in Children’s Dental Care: The Silent Epidemic Continues,” can be heard in an archived audio Web cast (“connectlive.com/events/ada/”). ■