

**Twin Falls Times News, Thursday, July 21, 2011 – by Kimberlee Kruesi**

## **After Idaho Dental Cuts, the Pain Runs Deep**

Idaho's recent Medicaid coverage cuts are not going unnoticed. As a pediatric dentist at Smiles 4 Kids in Twin Falls, Dr. Garth Stoddard has seen the effects of the Legislature's decision to trim state Medicaid spending first-hand. "It's frustrating to have cuts and not have anyone seem interested in what these cuts will mean," he said.

The state's cost-saving Medicaid reform passed earlier this year left more than 42,000 Idahoans under Medicaid without non-emergency dental coverage. The dental program cuts - part of larger, \$34 million reform-based savings - are estimated to save the state \$1.7 million from the general fund and \$3.9 million in federal funds.

The cuts will only affect adults over the age of 21. Children and pregnant women will continue to receive Medicaid-provided dental services.

Stoddard estimated the office sees 600-700 Medicaid patients a month. However, he said he expects that number to grow as a result of the Medicaid coverage cuts.

"I'm getting calls from other dentists wanting to know if I can take a certain case or a special-needs patient now that other offices can no longer accept adult Medicaid patients," he said. "As a dentist, I want to say yes but I can't take them all."

While Medicaid-covered children will still receive dental services, current adults will still need care, said Dr. Don Wyatt, who runs a dental practice in Twin Falls. Wyatt was also the recent president for the South Central Idaho Dental Association.

"Obviously it's a great thing that young children will still receive dental care," he said. "But by the time something gets to an emergency level the treatment is costly, so how much money is being saved here?"

The cuts will particularly affect those whose sole income comes from Social Security, said Robyn Ho Chee, co-owner for Omega Services Coordination. The organization provides health service coordinators for mentally disabled individuals. "Our concern is finding dentists for our clients," Ho Chee said. "People are still going to routine cleanups and some people will need sedation during a procedure, but very few are going to be able to afford it."

Family Health Services offers the only clinic with a sliding fee scale in the area, Ho Chee said. She fears that clients will face a difficult time scheduling appointments there as more and more people flood the clinic.

"In this area, people do not have fallback options if Medicaid services keep getting cut," she said. "I'm worried about the future of these decisions." However, Wyatt believes that the budget changes could also be a time to begin changing the structure of Medicaid. Removing non-emergency coverage will only maintain a certain level of sub-standard hygiene levels, he said. "Medicaid offers a lot of good options for people but is a broken system," he said. "Instead of giving people emergency coverage, Medicaid needs to offer incentives to maintain healthy dental hygiene so they never get to an emergency level."