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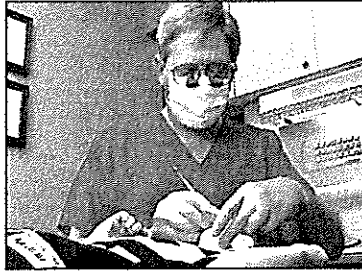
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## Investigation: Dentists won't treat children on state health plan

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Most of us don't love going to the dentist. But most everyone would admit it's important, especially for kids.

Right now, tens of thousands of Wisconsin children are being turned away from dentists for one simple reason: they use the state health plan, BadgerCare.

BadgerCare is a form of medical assistance that gives one million low-income Wisconsin residents access to doctors and dentists through the federal Medicaid program.

A 4-month WKOW investigation revealed major problems with BadgerCare's dental coverage. Virtually no dentists in Dane, Sauk, Rock or Columbia counties are accepting new patients on the BadgerCare health plan, leaving many families with no options for pediatric dental care in southern Wisconsin.

"We can't find a dentist for nothing in the world," said Jill Schwantz of Portage, who told WKOW she called hundreds of dentists in southern Wisconsin. "Every single dentist said no."

Schwantz is looking for a dentist to treat her three children, ages nine, six and two-and-a-half.

Another mother, Susan Hessel of Madison, also told us of her struggle to find a dentist to treat her 14-year-old son.

"If you're one of the first ten callers, three months from now, on this day, on this morning, we might be able to add you as a new client," said Hessel, recounting her experience calling dental offices in the Madison area.

Hessel has been trying to find a dentist for two years.

The state's Dept. of Health Services say 600 families a week call its hotline, most of them looking for dentists for their children.

WKOW confirmed the claims of these and other families. Our reporter personally called hundreds of dentists in southern Wisconsin using a published list of participating dentists posted on BadgerCare's official website. Nearly every single dentist refused to accept new BadgerCare patients. The only exceptions were public clinics, usually with long waiting lists, or other special age, referral or emergency care restrictions.

Families say it's especially frustrating to call dentists listed on the BadgerCare website, only to be turned down. The state says the website is merely a list of dentists who are treating some BadgerCare patients, not necessarily willing to treat new ones.

Dentists tell us the BadgerCare dental program is broken.

They blame low reimbursement rates, complicated government paperwork, and a history of BadgerCare patients who don't show up for appointments.

"We've been trying for years to try to make the program better for the population and dentists, with no success at all," said Dr. Timothy Kinzel, a pediatric dentist in Madison. "Let me put it this way. What if Physicians Plus or Group Health or Dean Care was selling insurance to these patients and telling them they had these providers. But then they couldn't find a provider. My guess is the politicians would be a little worried about that."

BadgerCare pays dentists significantly lower rates than private insurance companies. At Dr. Kinzel's practice, a standard cleaning costs \$74, a rate that most private insurers pay. BadgerCare pays \$21 for the same service.

A two-surface white filling is billed at \$215, also a rate paid by private insurance companies. Dr. Kinzel would only get \$56 from the state's BadgerCare plan.

Dr. Kinzel's practice is made up of about 30 to 40 percent of medical assistance patients. If the practice opened its doors and accepted any BadgerCare child who wanted treatment, Dr. Kinzel says his practice would not survive.

"The reality is the program doesn't work," said Dr. Kinzel.

Dentists also say the state rejects reimbursement claims and refuses to pay ten times more often than private insurance providers.

"I wish I could convince these dentists to enter," said Jason Helgerson, Medicaid Director for the Dept. of Health Services. "Yes, we need more dentists to participate in the program. Yes, we're committed to trying to work with them. I wish I had all the money in the world to pay them more. The simplest, easiest solution to all of us would be about \$100 million."

Helgerson stressed the state is acting aggressively to respond to what he calls "access challenges."

The department recently created a 12-person dental unit to field calls and match families with dentists. That special hotline gets about 600 calls a week, 30,000 or so a year from Wisconsin families. Helgerson says it's a start, but acknowledges many families have to travel farther than he'd like to find a dentist willing to treat new BadgerCare patients.

Susan Hessel, the Madison mother trying for two years to find a dentist to treat her son, says she's planning to drive to Chicago and pay in cash.

And that's yet another flaw with the BadgerCare program, according to the families.

Once you're enrolled in BadgerCare, dentists are prohibited by law from treating you outside of the official program. That means dentists can't accept cash payments, even if patients want to pay out of pocket.

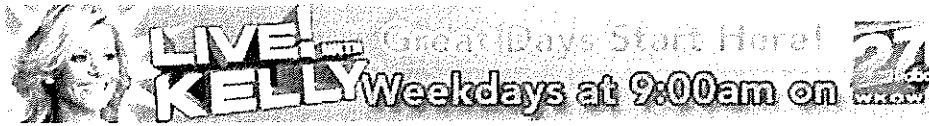
"The system is not working right now," said Hessel.

Families don't simply drop out of BadgerCare entirely because it provides standard medical coverage, which doesn't appear to have any of the access problems the dental side has.

"I think the state is running a very good program," said Helgerson. "We're providing health services to a million people."

Helgerson encourages families to contact the state's dental unit for assistance finding a dentist.

The toll-free number to the Dept. of Health Service's BadgerCare dental unit is (800) 362-3002.



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