



Editorial

## The root problem

**Until the state's reimbursement rate for dentists is addressed, we need to fully support programs that provide oral health services to the poor.**

Dec. 14, 2009

The need for the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Dental Clinic is obvious. Tooth pain is no respecter of income level.

Thousands of poor Wisconsin children are without dental care essentially because dentists can't afford to see them. And that's because of notoriously low reimbursements under BadgerCare Plus. The clinic is often the only option for the city's poor. The St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Dental Clinic addresses these issues for the neediest on Milwaukee's south side.

The Journal Sentinel's Georgia Pabst reported Monday that the clinic served more than 4,500 patients last year. Of that number, 1,500 were served at the clinic and 3,000 children through its Smart Smile, a portable dentist program that travels to schools.

Programs like these should be expanded. Especially during these tough economic times, dental needs often take a back seat to paying bills and putting food on the table. By the time patients walk into the clinic, they are often in pain because of this neglect. These clinics help to bridge the gap between need and access for the city's poor.

An estimated 60% of the children screened by the Smart Smiles program have cavities. But it's hard for them to get dental services in the community because few dentists accept patients with BadgerCare.

Earlier this year, the Journal Sentinel reported that fewer than one in four kids ages 3 to 19 who are insured through the Medicaid program BadgerCare Plus saw a dentist in 2007. That means more than 300,000 children in the state didn't get that necessary checkup.

This is happening because the state's reimbursement rate for dentists who accept BadgerCare Plus is too low. And with little money in the state budget to address the problem, the need for clinics like St. Elizabeth's grows.

Until the reimbursement issue is addressed, free clinics that serve the poor are the only access to dentists they are likely to get. We applaud the work done at the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Dental Clinic, supported by Columbia St. Mary's Health System.

But ultimately, the solution lies with increasing the reimbursement rate for dentists so they can afford to  
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see BadgerCare Plus clients.

*Should more be done to expand dental care to the poor? To be considered for publication as a letter to the editor, e-mail your opinion to the [Journal Sentinel editorial department](#).*

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