Congress should recognize the essential role of oral health in overall health and provide access to dental care in any health care coverage expansion.

The landmark 2000 Surgeon General’s Report on Oral Health in America’s major findings include:

- **Oral diseases and disorders in and of themselves affect health and well-being throughout life.**
  These conditions include oral birth defects, common dental diseases, chronic facial pain and oral cancers. They can impede vital functions such as breathing and eating and limit activities of daily living.

- **The mouth reflects general health and well-being.**
  As a gateway to the body, the mouth can be an early indicator of nutritional deficiencies, immune system problems, infection and other diseases and conditions.

- **Oral diseases and conditions are associated with other health problems.**
  Associations between chronic oral infections and diabetes, heart disease and adverse pregnancy outcomes have been reported in the clinical literature and research on these relationships continues.

**Oral Health Matters in Health Care Reform**

- **Good oral health care reduces costs of other medical conditions.** In 2008, the University of Michigan School of Dentistry and the Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation of Michigan announced findings from an analysis of five years of health claims data showing that for people with diabetes, regular periodontal services can lower overall medical and pharmacy costs by more than 10% and diabetes-related medical costs can be lowered by as much as 19%.

- **Untreated oral conditions have personal and financial costs.** In February 2007, 12-year old Deamonte Driver of Prince George’s County, Maryland died when bacteria from an untreated tooth abscess spread to his brain. A timely $80 tooth extraction could have saved him; instead, hospital costs were estimated to exceed $250,000 prior to his death.

- **Unmet oral health needs strain other parts of the health care system.** In 2003, the Annals of Emergency Medicine published a review of emergency department (ED) use for dental problems. It found an average of 738,000 annual ED visits for tooth pain or injury. The population with the highest proportion of ED users for dental issues was 19-to-35 year olds.

**CONTINUED**
UNMET ORAL HEALTH NEEDS

- Dental caries (tooth decay) and periodontal disease (gum disease) are the two primary dental diseases. They are preventable but still prevalent among Americans.

  - Dental caries is the most common chronic disease among children aged 5 to 17 years — five times more common than asthma (59% versus 11%).

  - 27% of adults 35-to-44 years old and 30% of adults 65 years and older have untreated dental caries.

  - One quarter of all Americans 60 years and older has lost all of their teeth.

  - Two out of every four Americans have signs of mild periodontal disease or gingivitis with almost 30% showing signs of the more severe disease chronic periodontitis.

WHAT WORKS TO ENSURE GOOD ORAL HEALTH?

- **Prevention works.** Dental sealants have been shown to reduce decay by more than 70%. Together sealants and fluoride have the potential to nearly eliminate decay in school age children. Yet the CDC reported in 2008 that less than 1/3 of children ages 6-19 had received sealants.

- **Treatment works.** Periodontal disease is considered the major cause of tooth loss in adults. Periodontal disease in its mildest form is reversible with professional treatment and good oral home care, so early intervention reduces the likelihood of tooth loss and costly replacements.

- **Dental benefits work.** According to the Surgeon General, insurance matters, uninsured children are 2.5 times less likely than insured children to receive dental care. Yet, for every child without medical insurance, there are at least 2.6 without dental insurance. For every adult 19 years or older without medical insurance, there are 3 without dental insurance.

\textsuperscript{ii} For more on the relationship between oral health and other conditions see:


\textsuperscript{vii} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{xiv} Periodontal Disease: Don't Wait Until it Hurts, American Dental Association; produced in cooperation with the American Academy of Periodontology. 2008