



Groups probe ways to improve children's dental care

by **Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff** • Associate Editor

A diverse group of leaders in medicine and dentistry recently gathered to explore ways to improve dental care in children in the wake of troubling news about declining oral health in younger children.

A key goal of the Academy's National Summit on Children's Oral Health: A New Era of Collaboration was to gauge the progress of children's oral health since the release of the 2000 Surgeon General's report.

"The significance (of the conference) is we had a medical professional association calling together a summit exclusively focused on oral health, and I don't believe that's ever happened before," said Wendy E. Mouradian, M.D., M.S., FAAP, conference co-chair.

Oral disease in younger children is increasing, especially in poor and minority children. In addition, recent data show dental health also is worsening in some Caucasian populations, Dr. Mouradian said.

The good news is this is preventable, she added.

"I think the bottom line message has to be prevention, and it has to be...early. And the people who see children early are pediatricians and nurse practitioners and family physicians. So it has to be our charge," Dr. Mouradian said.

The two-day conference in Rosemont, Ill., offered discussions on science and surveillance, children with special needs, and workforce and policy. More than 100 participants represented dental, medical and child health organizations, along with leadership from federal agencies, universities and state health departments. About 80 experts contributed papers to the conference.

"It was a pretty amazing compilation of people who are movers and shakers," said Suzanne Boulter, M.D., FAAP, chair of the AAP Oral Health Initiative. "Hopefully, a lot of the materials presented are going to be published and disseminated widely. ...I would hope pediatricians feel compelled to act in their own practices and in their own communities."

The story of 12-year-old Deamonte Driver, of Maryland, served as a symbol of what can happen to children who lack access to the most basic dental care. With a large photo of Deamonte displayed on a screen in the conference room, participants were reminded of how the boy died in 2007 after a toothache progressed to an abscess that spread to his brain. His tragic case spurred reform efforts in Maryland.

"He is emblematic (of the dental crisis)," said Harry Goodman, D.M.D., M.P.H., director of the Office of Oral Health, Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. "Deamonte never com-

Messages from the summit

- Assess risk and intervene early. Ensure oral health assessments by age 1 by a qualified health professional. Train all pediatricians to provide this care.
- Draw on the evidence. Use sealants, fluorides, appropriate dietary practices and evidence-based strategies to prevent and treat disease. Pediatricians can provide or advocate for these.
- Integrate oral health into overall health, education and policy (and other venues where pediatricians have influence).
- Go where the kids are: pediatric offices, hospitals, schools, Head Start, child care and other community settings.
- Partner with parents. They are children's best allies against dental disease.

plained, and no one was looking. It was the perfect storm."

The Academy is playing a leadership role in promoting ways to improve children's oral health (see sidebar), said Dr. Mouradian. The Oral Health Initiative is gathering and creating resources to train pediatricians, and a new American Dental Association Foundation grant will help enable every state to have its own oral health leadership training program.

One silver lining is with pediatricians now offering oral health assessments, fluoride varnishes and counseling about diet and oral hygiene, they might be able to help prevent obesity, as well. "The kids who are most at risk for obesity are also the kids most at risk for caries, in part because of the low socioeconomic and minority status but also eating habits," said Dr. Mouradian.

"I'm really optimistic that pediatricians can do this in their own communities."

Major support for the Summit was provided by Procter & Gamble and Delta Dental Plans Association.

RESOURCE

For information on training and other resources, or to join a listserv, visit the AAP Oral Health Initiative Web site at www.aap.org/commpepd/ochs/oralhealth/ or e-mail oralhealth@aap.org.