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## Primary care physicians enlisted to provide preventive dental services

R. Gary Rozier, D.D.S., M.P.H.

A five-year demonstration project launched by the North Carolina Medicaid program to help reduce high levels of tooth decay in the state's most vulnerable children has proven successful.



Dr. Rozier

The effort, led by a broad coalition representing medicine, dentistry and public health, was designed to increase access to preventive dental services for preschoolers in the state, where four out of 10 children entering kindergarten have tooth decay. Studies have shown that early intervention for dental disease is important for the long-term health of these children.

Recognizing that low-income children have substantially better access to medical care than dental care, the demonstration engaged primary care medical practitioners to provide preventive dental services.

Under this program, Medicaid reimburses for up to six visits before 3 years of age. Oral screening, risk assessment, referral to a dentist when needed, fluoride varnish application and counseling of caregivers on oral health care practices are provided at each visit ([www.ncafp.com/site3/web/imb/](http://www.ncafp.com/site3/web/imb/)). Practices must participate in continuing medical education sponsored by the AAP North Carolina Chapter and the North

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Carolina Academy of Family Physicians before they are eligible for reimbursement.

"When this program was first introduced, we voted unanimously to support it," said Gail K. Rohlfing, D.D.S., M.S., president of the North Carolina Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

Though most physicians do not have experience with fluoride varnish, program results showed that this effective clinical caries preventive procedure can be integrated easily into busy medical practices along with existing counseling and screening. Parents also were satisfied with their children getting these dental services at their doctors' offices (Rozier RG, et al. *Pediatr Dent*.2005 ;27:313 -322[[Medline](#)]).

Results of the program also demonstrated a substantial increase in access to preventive dental services for young Medicaid children in North Carolina. Since its inception, close to one-quarter of a million preventive visits have occurred in medical offices, and the number continues to increase (see figure above). The number of children visiting dental offices also increased during this period.

A preliminary analysis of Medicaid claims shows that having four to six preventive dental visits in medical offices prevents 264 caries-related treatments per 1,000 children through age 3. Studies to determine the impact of the program on dental health status, averted hospitalizations and Medicaid savings are being completed with funding from the National Institutes of Health.

The demonstration program targeted approximately 1,400 pediatric and family medicine practices seeing young Medicaid children, pediatric and family medicine residency programs, and local health departments. About 400 practices located in nearly all of the state's 100 counties (close to 70% of those trained during the demonstration project) now participate. All pediatric residency programs in the state have residents provide preventive dental services.

"The program has been a great success for our pediatric residents. They know who to send to the dentist immediately and who can be treated with fluoride varnish and follow-up until they can get in to see a dentist," said Dennis A. Clements, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H., chief medical officer for Duke Children's Hospital. "The program provides a framework for treatment and referral that did not exist before. In addition, parents have much more of an understanding of the importance of dental health as part of well-child care."

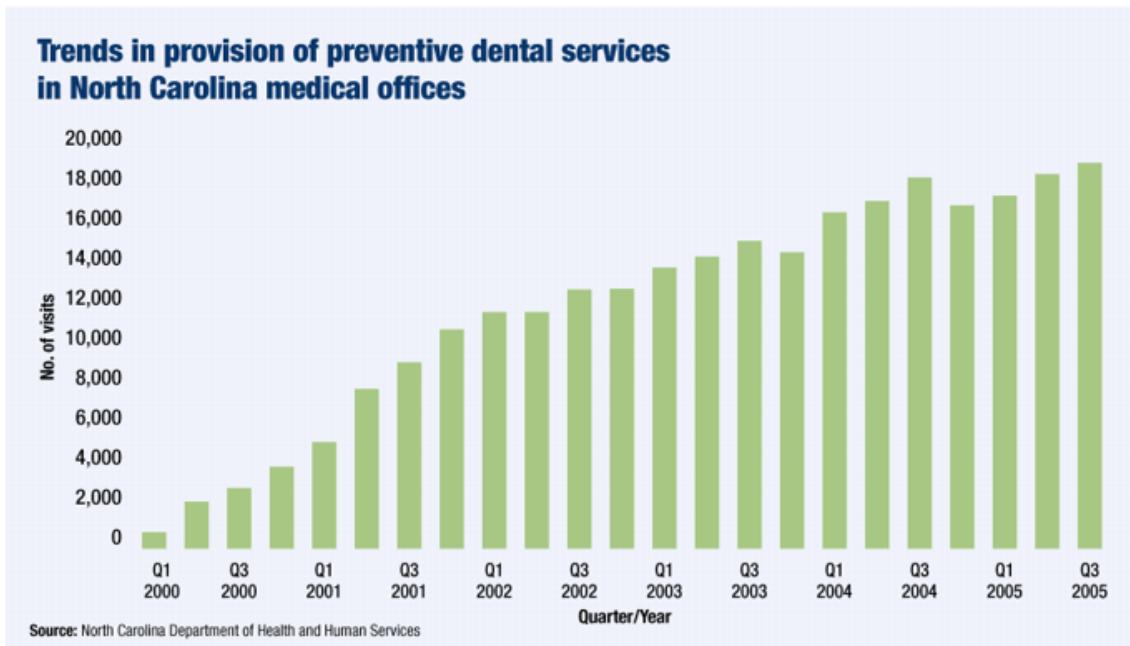
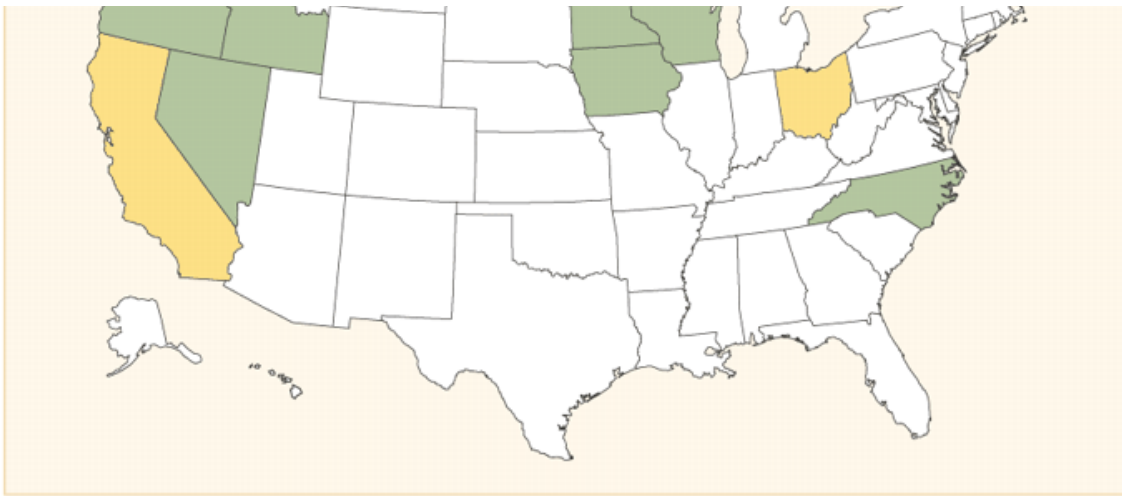
The program was initiated in 2001 through grants and other financial support from the North Carolina Medicaid program, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Prior to the launch, three years of developmental work was supported by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the North Carolina Partnership for Children and other state agencies.

The program continues to expand through additional funding from HRSA and state agencies, and is working with Early Head Start programs on an oral health community-based initiative.

*Dr. Rozier is professor of Health Policy and Administration at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, School of Public Health.*



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