

HISTORY OF DENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH IN VIRGINIA

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The year 2002 marked the 82nd anniversary of the establishment of the dental public health program in Virginia. In 1920, State Health Commissioner Dr. E. G. Williams appointed Dr. E. J. Applewhite, a former president of the Virginia Dental Association, to make a survey of the oral conditions among children in the state. The survey lasted four months and 76 of the 100 counties in the state were visited. Because of the appalling oral conditions, the Virginia Dental Association formulated and submitted recommendations to the State Board of Health. In February 1921, Dr. N. Talley Ballou was appointed dental director of the Bureau of Mouth Hygiene, making Virginia the second oldest dental program in the nation. Today, every state has some formal state governmental structure for dental public health. Dental programs were formed because of the realization that dental caries was a major public health problem affecting every segment of society. While the organizational structure and program activity of each state may differ due to funding and staffing patterns, the goal of each program remains the same - optimal oral health for all people.

During the early years, services provided for children included screenings, cleanings, fillings and extractions. Education was a major component of every program and emphasized proper brushing, restriction of sweets and regular visits to the dentist. The total state budget for the first year of the program was \$9,000. Two full time and two part time dentists provided 14,561 procedures for 4,803 children. While periodontal disease was recognized, it received little attention because of the overwhelming dental caries condition presented by every child receiving dental care.

It is no wonder dental public health in 1945 embraced fluoridation with its promise of eliminating dental decay. Dentists, public and private, have seen the effects of fluoridation on the dental health of the children in Virginia. Estimates are that community water fluoridation currently costs on average \$0.51 per person per year, far less than the fee for a single restoration. Dental public health has worked hand-in-hand over the years with the entire dental profession to implement fluoridation where feasible: this measure has become the foundation of every state dental public health program. Currently 93 percent of Virginians on public water supplies are receiving the dental benefits of fluoridation.

State dental public health has also encouraged fluoride research and has quickly adopted fluoride in all its form as a means of reaching rural children who do not have the benefits of fluoridated water. Dietary fluoride, topical fluoride applications, fluoride mouth rinse and school fluoridation have been or are currently part of every state program.

As of 2000, statistics show that the Virginia State dental program has 49 full and part time dentists, 52 dental assistants' and 4 dental hygienists providing services to 76 localities. Last year, FY 2000, 27,906 children received dental services in a total of

55,651 patient visits. Almost 22,022 children participated in dental health education programs and 17,935 school children were screened for oral disease. Patients received over 247,928 services valued at more than nine and a half million dollars. Dental sealants have proven to be an effective dental preventive measure. Last year public health professionals applied more than 36,717 sealants to the teeth of Virginia school children.

The emphasis for care in Virginia always has been for the children who could not afford or obtain care in the private sector. Eligibility for the program for the past twenty-five years has been the schools' free and reduced lunch program participants. The program also treats children eligible for either Medicaid or the recently enacted Family Access to Medical Insurance Security Plan (FAMIS).

Education is still a major theme of every dental program with the prevention of periodontal disease now receiving its due emphasis. Educational sessions and workshops on other aspects of oral health have expanded to include the application of sealants, the elimination of tobacco use, the practice of proper nutrition, and the prevention of oral cancer.

There have been great improvements in the dental health of the people of this country since the founding of the first state dental public health program eighty four years ago. Virginia's dental public health professionals have played a major role in these improvements. It would not have been possible, however, without the wholehearted support of the entire dental profession. Dental public health, as practiced on the state level, has always been based on partnerships. Without the cooperation of organized dentistry, individual dentists, dental hygienists and assistants, school personnel, the dental school, state and local health officials, water works operators and concerned citizens none of the accomplishments of public health dentistry would have been possible.

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