

**Op-Ed            Keep Oral Health in Healthcare Reform**

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As Congress continues debate on comprehensive health care reform, it is important that the New Mexico delegation members continue their strong support for oral health as an elemental part of health care reform. As is the case throughout the country, thousands of New Mexicans are not getting the dental care they need – mainly because there are not enough dentists and dental hygienists to meet patient needs. For example, twenty-nine of New Mexico’s thirty-three counties do not have enough dentists to serve their communities, and four counties do not have any dentists at all.

New Mexico currently ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in the nation for the number of dentists per 1,000 people. The median number of dentists to population in New Mexico is 1 to 3,297, compared to the federal standard of 1 to 1,050 per population. Currently many dental clinics that serve lower-income people have months-long waiting lists. We need nearly 2,000 more dental practitioners to meet the dental care needs of all New Mexicans.

Now is the time for our policymakers to keep oral health in the health reform discussions. New Mexico policymakers have already completed significant research regarding oral healthcare gaps. Both the 2009 State of Health Report and Governor Richardson’s New Mexico Oral Health Council have recommended a practical alternative-- a midlevel dental health practitioner model-- to work in areas where patients cannot find or afford even the most basic oral health care. New Mexico and the nation already rely on other midlevel providers such as nurse practitioners, nurse midwives and physicians assistants to help solve critical health access and workforce problems.

We are fortunate in New Mexico to have elected officials in our legislature and Congress who understand the crisis in oral health. The entire New Mexico delegation – Sen. Jeff Bingaman, Sen. Tom Udall, Rep. Martin Heinrich, Rep. Harry Teague, and Rep. Ben Ray Lujan – has provided needed support on this issue. In particular, Sen. Bingaman has been an important leader in efforts to expand oral health care for people in New Mexico and across the country. We applaud the good work that Sen. Bingaman, and his New Mexico colleagues are doing to make dental care a priority, and we urge them to continue their efforts when Congress reconvenes to address health care reform again in September. We applaud Governor Richardson for his work and support on this issue and hope he will reconvene his Oral Health Council.

At the same time, Con Alma Health Foundation is currently convening interested stakeholders throughout the state, including health clinics, practitioners, patient advocates, and many others to collaboratively search for solutions to our access and workforce gap. Together, we must address the issues of supervision, scope of practice, training, reimbursement and quality of care. Anyone interested in participating can contact us at (505) 438-0776.

Dental health is an intrinsic part of a person’s overall health. We need to treat it as such, and ensure that all New Mexicans have access to good, basic oral health care.