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EDITORIAL

Texas Dental Care: Pay Now or Pay Later

Editorial Board

When Texans — especially the youngest and oldest among us — need a dentist, they can encounter a combination of geographic and financial barriers.

Texas legislators will be asked to do something about that when the regular session convenes in January, adding to a long list of requests for a shrinking supply of state money.

A report issued last week by the Texas Dental Association makes a compelling argument that lack of dental care leads to other, more expensive, illnesses. We all know that preventing an illness is cheaper than curing one, but political and financial considerations will inhibit legislators from making any sweeping changes.

There are some recommendations included in the report that wouldn't break the bank. A public awareness campaign on the importance of regular checkups is one. Another — that all Texans find "a regular dental care provider" — is admittedly an ambitious one. However, the report suggests taking steps toward that goal by finding primary care dentists for children between ages 1 and 5 in partnership with the dental association.

That raises a point lawmakers should consider: Though the state will be called upon to make a financial commitment, there are other resources to draw upon. The association and individual members contribute free dental care already. A coordination of effort wouldn't require a huge outlay.

Requiring that dental students be tested for their competency in treating infants isn't a backbreaker, either. The Legislature could also study ways to encourage dental graduates to set up practice in rural areas, where dentists are in short supply.

There is a cost to untreated oral maladies. Employees miss work, and students miss school. "Left untreated, certain dental infections can become systemic and damage other parts of the body, resulting in the need for expensive emergency (room) visits, hospital stays, anesthesia and antibiotics," the report notes.

Decisions on state dental care policy — like so many others — boil down to when public dollars are to be spent. Spending some now would be prudent if it saves paying a lot more later.