Much of the recent discussion of health care reform has ignored oral health. That's unfortunate, because it's essential to overall health and well-being of Americans and our nation's productivity. In fact, dental-related absences total 51 million hours for students across the country and more than 164 million work hours for adults annually.

More importantly, dentists are among the first to spot warning signs of potential systemic disease during a checkup. That's why we at Delta Dental are so concerned about the health care reform bills moving through Congress.

Oral health should be a top priority in any health care reform; yet it is being treated as an afterthought.

For example, the health reform bill moving through the House of Representatives, H.R. 3200, creates “exchanges,” in effect national marketplaces where consumers can purchase insurance. As originally drafted, it stipulated only comprehensive medical insurance plans could be offered through the exchange. Stand alone dental coverage - well over 80 percent of the dental coverage provided in this country - would not be permitted to be offered.

The only exception is when the medical plan includes dental benefits for children under 21. Well-intentioned as it may be, even that change makes no sense as most Americans purchase dental insurance as a family. H.R. 3200 would force parents to purchase two separate dental policies inside and outside the exchange, one for their kids and one for themselves. That’s inefficient and runs counter to President Obama’s promise that you can keep your coverage if you’re happy with it.

Delta Dental, as with most dental benefit plans, offers stand alone independent benefits. We serve more than 54 million Americans, and provide access to nearly 675,000 in Oklahoma. Dental coverage is all we do and it is distinctly different than medical coverage.

While medical focuses on treating diseases and illness, dental concentrates on prevention through low-cost check-ups and cleanings. Additionally, dental is separately licensed and regulated by the states and administered through procedure codes and plan economics that are far different than those governing medical plans.

A recent poll by Oral Health America found that 63 percent of American adults think it is important that dental coverage be part of an overall health reform package; 40 percent say it is very important. Unfortunately, the way H.R. 3200 was originally drafted, dental coverage for an overwhelming majority of Americans would be at risk.

Just before the bill was approved by the House Energy and Commerce Committee, H.R. 3200 was amended to permit stand-alone dental benefits options to be offered within the Exchange. But that’s no assurance that the problem is fixed, in fact, the next step is for this bill to be “blended” with two other bill proposals. Given the enormous number of issues to be reconciled, and the way Congress has typically handled the subject, there’s a serious risk that oral health care will end up on the cutting-room floor.

Health care reform is important, but so is the oral health of every American. Don’t let Congress put that at risk. Tell them how important it is that dental coverage receives fair treatment in this legislation. We need to assure that every American-including the 130 million who do not have dental coverage-are given the opportunity to purchase stand alone dental coverage.
Foundation Spotlight: Good Shepherd Denture Clinic (OKC)

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WANTED: TRACK LIGHTING
Desperately need two used ceiling-mount track lights. Good Shepherd Ministries of Oklahoma, Inc., a 501 (c) (3) organization. Contact Dr. Frank Lipsinic. H: 405-842-8303; W: 405-271-5346.

DENTISTS NEEDED
The OU/Southern Oklahoma Technology Center in Ardmore needs volunteer dentists for their Dental Hygiene Clinic. There is also an opening for a part-time Supervisory Dentist. Contact Christy McCullers at 580-223-2070 ext. 268 for details.

CITY RESCUE MISSION DENTAL CLINIC is in need of a replacement x-ray process unit and x-ray processing chemicals. They also need volunteer dentists, assistants, and hygienists. Contact Rev. Debbi McCullock MS, ARNP at 405-517-3114.

VHS TO DVD CONVERTER
Dental educators need to transfer their old VHS tapes to DVD for use by schools. If you can donate a converter or any dental education resources, please contact Kristi Love, RDH, at 580-338-8544 or kristil@health.ok.gov.

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