New report from The Pew Charitable Trusts outlines two shortages limiting children’s access to care

By Robert Selleck, Managing Editor

A report released June 23 by The Pew Charitable Trusts concludes that a lack of access to dental care in the United States, especially among low-income children and families, is being compounded by uneven geographic distribution of dental services and dentists’ low Medicaid participation rates.

The findings are consistent with previous studies and analysis by Pew, which is a strong backer of the concept of expanding the role of midlevel providers of oral health care as a core strategy to improve access to dental care among underserved populations.

This latest analysis also warns of an impending likelihood that the access-to-care challenge will increase because of the number of dentists intending to retire soon and the number of children who will qualify for subsidized dental care through private or public insurance programs when provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act take effect in 2014.

Drawing on data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services — Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the American Dental Association and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services — Health Resources and Services Administration respectively, a table in the Pew report provides a state-by-state snapshot of the converging challenge.

For more information, see page A2.
Maine Senate defeats midlevel provider bill

Maine House had approved the proposed legislation 95-45

A June “issue brief” from The Pew Charitable Trusts provides several examples of dentists in both business and academia supporting state initiatives to expand certain capabilities of non-dentist members of the dental services team. But Maine dentists are not listed among the examples.

An explanation for that might be found in a recent Bangor Daily News article by Matthew Stone in which the defeat of midlevel-provider legislation in the Maine Senate is attributed to heavy lobbying by Maine dentists. Just days before the Pew issue brief was released in June, the Maine Senate voted down legislation that would have created licensed “dental hygiene therapists” to help address the state’s access-to-dental-care gap.

Fifty-three countries have similar licensing in place, and in the United States, Alaska and Minnesota have some form of midlevel licensing available to help address access-to-care challenges. The Pew issue brief reports that approximately 15 states have some type of midlevel dental-care provider legislation under consideration. But in Maine, it’s back to the drawing board for proponents of such licensing.

The Pew analysis also downplays the value of an anticipated increase in the number of dental schools opening as having meaningful impact on increasing the expected wave of dentists retiring. According to the analysis, the expectation is that new dentists will continue to open practices in heavily populated areas and primarily serve privately insured patients.

The report also quotes American Dental Association statistics looking at 2010 to 2030 that indicate an increasing number of dental-school graduates won’t keep pace with overall population growth to reach the projected demand. The Pew analysis also notes the Pew’s analysis also notes that more children and families get the care they urgently need.

Midlevel care providers supported

In the end, the report focuses on the expansion of a midlevel provider workforce as the most likely access-to-care answer that won’t fall short. "Midlevel providers can extend the reach of the dental team to areas where dentists are scarce,” the brief states. "They can also make it more financially feasible to provide care for Medicaid-enrolled children. Working under the supervision of dentists, these practitioners can improve the ability of safety-net systems to reach low-income communities, save states money on emergency room care and other costly alternatives, and ensure that more children and families get the care they urgently need.”

The Pew Charitable Trusts Children’s Dental Campaign continues to push for expansion of the dental workforce. It supports creation of trained ‘dental hygiene therapists’ — midlevel-care providers who could perform procedures now under taken by only dentists in most states. Photo by Johann Helgason, www.dreamstime.com