
Defense Report

AUSA



Dental Care for Military Dependents and Retirees—An Overdue Entitlement

By 1980 there will be 80 million American workers and their families participating in civilian health care programs that provide dental care. Largely as a result of collective bargaining between labor and management, the extent of dental insurance coverage has grown almost four-fold in the past.

Under present laws, *military* dental care is limited to active duty military people unless the dental care is "adjunctive" or a result of an injury or disease. In most instances, the dependent spouses and children of active military personnel can only be treated in military clinics for normal dental problems when they are stationed overseas. Retirees and their dependents are authorized only adjunctive treatment.

As the costs of civilian dental care have soared, fewer active and retired military families have been able to afford proper treatment. A recent survey among military families showed that while they spend as much as the average civilian family on dental care they are not receiving adequate service. An estimated one third of the dependents of active duty personnel see a dentist less than once a year. While no accurate statistics are available it is suspected that retirees and their dependents can afford even less-frequent care.

The members of the armed forces must rely on the support of the Department of Defense, the Congress and the President and on their collective ability to discern problems—like inadequate dental care—and to take corrective action.

The Department of Defense has approved a plan to provide expanded dental care under the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS). Draft legislation to implement the plan has been sent to the White House Office of Management and Budget for approval before it is sent to Congress.

The DoD proposal would provide preventive, diagnostic and emergency care and restorative services. The first three categories of care would be provided entirely by the government but a cost-sharing plan has been prepared for restorative services. Under this plan, a \$200 restorative tooth crown would cost a retiree or dependent just \$85, about the same as the portion paid in many civilian dental insurance plans.

Favorable consideration by the Office of Management and Budget and by the Congress will correct a long standing fault in the military health care system. The plan deserves strong public support.