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CHIRI's Issue Brief Reinforces the Importance of Access to Comprehensive Dental Care Services for Children in Public Insurance Programs

Tooth decay is one of the most preventable childhood diseases, yet dental care remains the most prevalent unmet health care need for children in the United States. A new Issue Brief from the Child Health Insurance Research Initiative (CHIRI), "Children's Dental Care Access in Medicaid: The Role of Medical Care Use and Dentist Participation," reports on children's dental care use in the Alabama and Georgia Medicaid programs and strategies for improving access to dental care.

Researchers found that less than 40 percent of Medicaid-enrolled children received dental care, which was typical of other states during the time period of study. Most of these children received preventive care and half used intensive dental services. While dentists' participation in Medicaid had some effect on improving dental care access, the Issue Brief concludes that other factors also influence dental care use in public insurance programs. Medicaid-enrolled children are far more likely to receive medical care than dental care. If every child who had a medical visit also had a dental visit, many (61 percent in Alabama and 78 percent in Georgia) Medicaid-enrolled children would have received dental care.

Many policymakers are examining State public insurance programs for ways to reduce costs and maximize the return on State and Federal investments. This CHIRI Issue Brief provides States with an additional resource as they make critical decisions about public insurance programs, including the provision of dental benefits to low-income children. The Issue Brief findings underline the importance of:

- early access to dental care and the use of preventive dental services,
- comprehensive dental benefits in public insurance programs for children, and
- multi-pronged strategies for improving access to dental care that capitalize on where children and their families seek care.

Copies of the Issue Brief are available on the CHIRI web-site at <http://www.ahrq.gov/about/cods/chirifind.htm> or by calling the AHRQ Publications Clearinghouse at (800) 358-9295. (Please specify AHRQ Publication No. 03-0032 when ordering the Issue Brief.) Information about other CHIRI findings is also available on the web-site.

CHIRI is a unique partnership between the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). CHIRI consists of nine research projects to examine which health insurance and delivery features work best for low-income children, particularly minority children and those with special health care needs. Future CHIRI products will cover: the characteristics of new SCHIP enrollees, adolescents quality of care prior to enrolling in SCHIP, and disenrollment and retention in public insurance programs.