

Delta Dental putting dentists among the doctors

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Oral health is health care, just as surely as taking care of a broken limb, a woozy stomach or a chronic condition is health care. But for as long as there have been doctors' and dentists' offices, they have typically been in separate places, usually with no communication between them.

[Delta Dental](#) of Colorado Foundation is looking to change that.

In a pilot project that officials believe is the first of its kind in the country, the Colorado foundation arm of the dental insurer is working with 16 clinics across the state to embed a dental hygienist permanently in each of them.

The goal is to find out whether such closer relations will improve patients' health, particularly among kids, by giving them and their parents one-stop locations where they can take care of all their needs, especially if a physician who is caring for them might notice that their teeth or gums need some immediate attention.

"We've been aware of the importance of optimal oral health for a long time. But the concept of optimizing oral health is relatively new," said Dr. Patricia Braun, a pediatrician at [Denver Health](#) who is involved with the health system's school-based integration project at Place Bridge Academy in east Denver. "People have to provide funding to take a chance."

At the 16 Colorado pilot locations — 14 in nonprofit clinics and two in for-profit physicians' offices, dental hygienists are given offices within the facilities. Parents and patients can make appointments directly with them, but the dental-care experts often are on alert throughout the day for patients being referred to them while they are at the clinic for other purposes.

While dental care is a benefit that most people have with their insurance, it is one that often goes overlooked, to the detriment of their overall health.

Only about 45 percent of the children who have Delta Dental policies receive oral care in any given year, Delta Dental Foundation senior program officer [Allison Cusick](#) said, as parents often don't have the time to run them to different parts of town for different care as they are balancing their jobs with their kids' health.

Cusick said that officials will measure the success of the \$3.3 million pilot program in several ways:

Participating clinics will be required to show the program is sustainable without grants after it's been established. They must increase the number of patients served over the time of the pilot program and increase the frequency of dental visits. And they must show the children being treated at the clinics suffer less tooth decay with the increased access.

While many of the clinics participating are smaller, some are part of large systems as well. Centura Health's Saint Anthony North Campus is about to launch an integrated dental clinic at its 84th Avenue campus in Westminster — a concept that CEO [Carole Peet](#) admits makes perfect sense but has gotten lost in the past in the silo-ization of health care.

"It hasn't been one of those services that traditionally has fallen under the purview of hospitals and hospital systems," Peet said.

If the program is proven to be a success, however, it soon may be.



KATHLEEN LAVINE / DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Gina Schmidt is the dental hygienist on staff at the health center at Place Bridge Academy in east Denver. She treats 5-year-old Anas Muktar Buznad while his sister and mother wait in the doorway.

Ed Sealoover

Reporter

Denver Business Journal

