

Imagine what it would be like to lose a child on account of a toothache because your insurance coverage lapsed and you didn't have access to the basic health services that may have saved his life. It's hard to imagine such a scenario could happen in the 21st Century in the most prosperous and resource-rich nation on the planet - but it did. Furthermore, it happened right here in Maryland.

Last month, I was appalled to hear of the tragic and preventable death Deamonte Driver, a 12-year old boy from Prince George's County, who died from a brain infection brought on by an abscessed tooth. Although Deamonte's tooth could have been easily treated with a routine extraction, he did not receive timely medical attention primarily because of Medicaid coverage and access problems.

It is simply unacceptable that in a country as prosperous as ours, a child could be at risk of losing his or her life because of a preventable and treatable toothache. Deamonte's story is a stark reminder of what is at stake and should serve as a clarion call for reaffirming our commitment to ensuring comprehensive coverage for all of America's children.

Last week, I urged support for a comprehensive dental benefit under Medicaid's State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) as the House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee conducted a hearing on children's dental health. Reauthorization of SCHIP is a top priority for us in Congress this year as well as the nation's Governors, who rely on the program to help their states provide health care coverage for uninsured children in low-income families.

The grim reality is that for many low-income families like Deamonte's, dental care is out of reach. Coverage under SCHIP varies from state to state, and even in states that provide dental services, such as in Maryland, too few dentists participate because of low reimbursement rates. As a result, less than one in three children enrolled in Maryland's Medicaid program receive dental care, and only 900 of the state's 5,500 dentists accept Medicaid.

The Surgeon General reported in 2000 in *Oral Health in America* that a "silent epidemic of oral diseases is affecting our most vulnerable citizens – poor children, the elderly, and many members of racial and ethnic minority groups." Although we have advanced in reducing dental disease, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that tooth decay in young children has actually increased over the past decade.

It is shocking that in the United States today, oral disease is the most prevalent chronic disease of children, and 80 percent of dental decay occurs in 25 percent of our nation's children, primarily low-income and minority children. Not surprisingly, dental care tops parents' list of health care concerns. Low-income children are twice as likely to suffer from dental disease as children from higher income families because of their lack of access to dental health care.

That is why I recently joined my fellow members of the Maryland Congressional Delegation in calling for comprehensive dental benefits under SCHIP. We have a duty to ensure that all of our children receive the medical attention they need, and dental care is no exception.

Last month, the House passed an emergency supplemental spending bill that provided \$750 million for states with SCHIP budget shortfalls, including Maryland. We also passed a Democratic budget plan that fully funds SCHIP and includes an increase of \$50 billion to expand children's health insurance to cover millions of additional uninsured children. Reauthorization of the program is expected to occur this summer.

As Congress takes up the reauthorization of SCHIP, I look forward to working to ensure that eligible children are enrolled and receive adequate health care. That includes providing children with the preventative dental care and access to providers that they need. No child should be lost because of a toothache.###