

Economy raises questions about dental insurance

As the end of 2008 is just around the corner, it would be wise to consider utilizing unused dental insurance benefits. Those who have dental insurance may not realize that unused benefits are lost and go directly back to the insurance company, which creates hundreds of thousands of dollars profit for the insurance companies each year. Dental insurance companies count on the fact that many people will not claim their \$1000 or so benefit by the end of the calendar year. Wise dental insurance customers look for legitimate means of utilizing their benefits each year. For example, maybe a crown has been recommended by the dentist but has been procrastinated for some reason. If cost is the issue, it would make sense to utilize unused dental insurance benefits to have the crown completed before December 31. This allows some dental insurance funds in the following year for unexpected dental needs, and maximizes the value of the premiums paid.

A second consideration as the new year approaches is whether or not purchasing dental insurance makes sense financially. Often employers offer dental insurance plans as an unpaid benefit that may not be the best investment of your hard-earned dollars. For example, high premiums are often charged for poor dental insurance plans because of negotiations made between medical insurance carriers and dental carriers. It is not uncommon for the premiums paid to be more



Dr. Kevin Huff
Dentist

than what the actual benefits paid by the insurance carriers are, depending on the terms of the contract.

As money becomes tighter in corporate America, insurance companies are becoming increasingly less willing to release money for claims coverage. It is interesting to note that in 1970, the average dental annual benefit was \$1000. Despite premiums raising exponentially since 1970, in 2007, the average dental annual benefit was still \$1000! Furthermore, it is harder to have claims paid. For instance, many insurance companies are now requiring that at least half of a tooth is fractured or decayed before a crown will be covered, despite the fact that the prognosis of the tooth is much lower with that amount of damage. Another major insurance carrier has recently announced its intention to withdraw out-of-network benefits and to contractually limit the fees for uncovered benefits even for providers, thus further interfering with the doctor/patient relationship.

Quite frankly, insurance companies are in business to make money, not to help take care of patients. With the increased usage and ability of third party financing for dental care that is now available, it may make more

sense to consider financing dental care instead of throwing money away to large third party conglomerates.

One last consideration as the end of the year approaches should be usage of flex spending accounts. Many employers now offer pre-tax flex spending accounts for healthcare expenses. Often underutilized, these are excellent mechanisms for saving about 20 percent on needed dental care. For example, if one opts to not pay for dental insurance and needs \$3000 in dental care, opting to place the \$3000 in a flex spending account can save the income tax on those monies and can usually be used as soon as January 1.

As you begin to make financial decisions for the end of this year and for the upcoming year, please consider a discussion with your dental office financial officer. They are often an untapped wealth of information and can usually thoroughly and knowledgeably discuss your dental financial options with you. In times of a challenging economy, knowing that you have a dental office that understands your financial needs and concerns is extremely important.

Dr. Kevin Huff is a general dentist in Dover, holds the status of "Master" in the Academy of General Dentistry, and is a clinical instructor at the Case School of Dental Medicine.

For questions about dental health or to schedule a complementary consultation, call 330-364-2011, visit www.doctorhuff.net, or ask your regular dentist.