

ANESTHESIA COVERAGE FOR CHILDREN

H.1030/S.618: An Act Relative to Anesthesia Coverage for Children Hospitalized for Dental Treatment

Bill Sponsors: Representative Kay Kahn and Senator Joan Lovely

The Massachusetts Dental Society believes that all Massachusetts residents, including the most vulnerable, should have access to necessary oral health care.

BACKGROUND

To receive proper and safe dental treatment, hospitalization and general anesthesia are often necessary for young children and people with special health conditions who have difficulty undergoing long dental procedures. These patients are prone to involuntary movements and risk suffering serious injury from sharp instruments in the mouth. General anesthesia renders a patient temporarily unconscious to prevent discomfort, pain, and movement that can affect the safety and outcome of the treatment process.

Unfortunately, many of these patients are forced to delay, compromise, or forgo necessary dental treatment because their families cannot afford hospital and anesthesia fees. Many private insurers refuse reimbursement for these costs, citing the procedures as not medically unnecessary. As a result, the patient does not receive necessary dental care, resulting in greater use of antibiotics and painkillers, disturbed sleep patterns, problems with eating, and overall prolonged pain and suffering.

KEY PROVISIONS

This legislation would enable children with disabilities, certain medical conditions, and all children under the age of six to receive the dental care they need by requiring health care plans to provide coverage for anesthesia and outpatient treatment.

While MassHealth currently covers these same costs, many children in the Commonwealth are ineligible. This legislation would ensure that these patients receive necessary care by covering the cost of general anesthesia administered by an anesthesiologist in a hospital.

KEY FACTS

- According to the Department of Public Health, 26% of all children under seven in Massachusetts have special health needs.
- Children who have delayed dental extractions because they are unable to receive general anesthesia suffer further pain. The *International Journal of Paediatric Dentistry* published one study of a six-month waiting period between diagnosis and treatment, where 49.4% of the children required antibiotics, 28.5% suffered disturbed and irregular sleep patterns, and 32.9% had problems with eating.
- At least 32 states have enacted legislation requiring private insurers to cover anesthesia for children hospitalized for dental treatment.
- A study conducted after legislation was passed in North Carolina in 2000 revealed a 60% increase in non-Medicaid visits and a 33% increase in Medicaid visits, with 43% more children overall seeking dental care.
- When Louisiana passed comparable legislation in 1997, a leading national medical insurance company indicated that the new law increased the cost of plans by less than 0.2%. This legislation would similarly allow increased access to care for vulnerable, special-needs patients without a significant cost increase.

The Massachusetts Dental Society urges the legislature to pass ***An Act Relative to Anesthesia Coverage for Children Hospitalized for Dental Treatment*** to require all third-party payers to administer hospitalization and general anesthesia cost reimbursements in recognition of the fact that general anesthesia is often necessary for the delivery of dental care to young children and those with developmental, mental, or physical disabilities.

Questions can be directed to:

Advocacy@massdental.org
Massachusetts Dental Society
508.480.9797

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) represents approximately 5,000 dentists in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (about 80 percent of dentists). A statewide constituent of the American Dental Association, the MDS is dedicated to the professional development of its members through initiatives in education, advocacy, the promotion of the highest professional standards, and championing oral health in the Commonwealth.