

*Remarks for the
Oral Health Task Force Press Conference
November 19, 2002*

Good afternoon. The health of our children is a strong indicator of where we are headed as a state. Healthy children go to school ready to learn, ready to succeed, ready to make the most of their promise and potential.

Keeping Mississippi's children healthy is a challenge, but it's one we are prepared to take on and overcome. There are many factors to deal with – diet and exercise, for example.

The oral health of Mississippi's children is a factor that hasn't received much attention.

The needs for Mississippi's children are great, and have reached a critical level. 28 percent of our children under the age of five live in poverty, and severe tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease in that age group.

Factors such as a lack of adequate transportation, large rural areas, and the difficulty for parents in taking off work to get their kids to a dentist all work create barriers to good oral health.

The needs are obvious, and that's why we have taken action to meet them.

Last fall, we hosted six states here in Jackson for a National Governors Association Policy Academy on “Improving Oral Health Care for Children.” The meeting focused on developing an action plan to address oral health care needs in children and building alliances between the public and private sectors to implement the plan.

A policy team of Mississippi health care professionals and public officials was led by Rica Lewis Payton, executive director of the Division of Medicaid. She and the members of her team have worked hard to bring us to this point today, and I want to thank them for their efforts.

The work done over the course of the Policy Academy meetings provided some vision for where we need to target our efforts. For example, dental sealants were identified as a need during the Policy Academy, and as a result, we've developed a collaborative pilot project between the School of Dentistry at the University Medical Center and the Delta Hills Public Health District.

This project is providing dental sealants to public school second graders in Attala, Bolivar, Carroll, Holmes, Humphreys, LeFlore, Montgomery, Sunflower and Washington Counties.

The policy team also identified the need for a full time Public Health Dentist in the state, and I'm pleased to say this position has been created and filled. Dr. Brian Amy will discuss this in greater detail in just a moment.

Today, I am issuing an executive order to create a state Oral Health Task Force to focus on the areas of prevention, health education, and the availability and affordability of quality oral health care. Dr. Amy, will chair the Task Force in its work to provide recommendations for meeting the oral health care needs of our children.

The work of bringing this task force together came out of the Policy Academy. Health care professionals and public officials from around the state have committed their time and energy to the oral health needs of Mississippi's children.

Many of the members of this task force are here with us today, and I want to thank them for their dedication, and for their efforts in the work that lies ahead of them.

I'd like to ask Dr. Amy to make a few comments, and we'll be glad to take questions later.

*(Dr. Amy speaks, then introduces Dr. Mosca.
After Dr. Mosca speaks, the floor will be opened
for questions).*