

KENTUCKIANS FOR NURSING HOME REFORM

“A non-profit organization dedicated to the welfare of the “Forgotten Kentuckians”

NEWS RELEASE

June 16, 2009

BETTER DENTAL CARE IN NURSING HOMES URGED

Nursing home residents are suffering from poor dental care, according to two Lexington (KY) dentists who have written an article about it appearing in the June issue of the *American Journal of Nursing*.

The article is a follow-up to a report published in the same journal describing a suffocation death in a nursing home caused by oral secretions.

In the article, Dr. Pamela Stein of the University of Kentucky and Dr. Robert Henry of the Lexington Veterans Affairs Medical Center are calling on nurses to lead the way in providing their nursing home residents with better oral care.

The authors quote several studies from throughout the U.S., including a study of Kentucky nursing homes that shows nearly 80 percent of residents had only fair to poor overall dental health. In fact, one-third of the residents in the study had not seen a dentist in more than five years. Studies from other states such as California and Florida report similar findings. One study in New York found that only 16% of the residents received any oral care and clean gloves were never worn; nursing assistants often brushed residents' teeth immediately after changing soiled garments.

The danger of this situation is that “in particularly vulnerable populations poor oral health can contribute to significant illness and even death,” say the authors. Numerous studies have suggested links between poor oral health and stroke and diabetes. Perhaps most importantly is the connection between poor oral health and respiratory diseases. Bacteria from the oral cavity is the primary cause of pneumonia in nursing home elders, a disease that results in significant morbidity and mortality in frail elders.

The serious health problems that result from ignoring oral disease are unnecessarily costing families and federal and state government money. One study showed that if all the nursing homes in the United States hired a single nurse's aide whose only duty was to provide oral hygiene for residents, it would significantly reduce pneumonia and result in costs savings of \$308 million.

Stein and Henry call on nurses to take action. They urge them to push for more and better oral hygiene supplies in their facilities and promote oral health as an institutional value.

Stein and Henry also are members of a committee formed to study and take action on better oral health care in Kentucky.

Kentuckians for Nursing Home Reform, a statewide advocacy group, is also a member of the committee.

CONTACTS: Dr. Pam Stein (859) 323-5591; Destie Stimes, VA Public Affairs (859) 281-4814; Bernie Vonderheide (859) 312-5617, <http://www.KyNursingHomeReform.org>