Seeing Spots: Addressing the Silent Epidemic of Acne in Outlandia's Youth

Acne is the most common chronic disease among adolescents in Outlandia (Outlandia Department of Health, 2010). Long considered a benign rite of passage, acne actually has far-reaching effects on the health and well being of adolescents, significantly affecting success in school, social relationships, and general quality of life. Yet large portions of the state's population are unable to access treatment for acne. The Secretary of Health's Report on Adolescents' Dermatologic Health in Outlandia (2010) is a call to action for policymakers and health professionals to improve the health and well being of Outlandia’s youth by increasing access to dermatologic care.

Scope of the Problem

Acne is five times more common than the common cold in adolescents (Outlandia Secretary of Health, 2010). The group at highest risk of acne—youth between the ages of 11 and 21—accounts for nearly 20 percent of Outlandia’s population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In a recent study of youth enrolled in public high schools in Outlandia, 70 percent had mild to moderate acne and 15 percent were in urgent need of dermatologic care (Halberstam, French, and Ramsey, 2009).

Effects of Acne

Untreated, acne can lead to significant physical, emotional, and social problems (Acne Eradication Program, 2009). These problems are preventable if the disease is treated early. However, acne is both progressive and cumulative, becoming more complex and costly to treat over time. At worst, untreated acne may lead to irreversible damage over the lifespan (AEP, 2009).

Access to Dermatologic Care

Prevention and early intervention are critical to avoid the long-term negative effects of acne. But American adolescents, particularly those living in poverty, have limited access to dermatologic care, resulting in unnecessary disease, discomfort, and school absenteeism. While children living in poverty suffer the same levels of acne as their more affluent peers, they are only half as likely to receive dermatologic care (Acne Eradication Program, 2009).

Currently, Outlandia has 56 practicing dermatologists (Outlandia Department of Health Professions, 2010). However, just 18—less than one-third—accept Medicaid (Outlandia Department of Medical Services, 2010), likely due to low reimbursement rates. Nationally, only
about one in five adolescents enrolled in Medicaid received a single dermatologic visit in a year (National Dermatologic Health Study, 2005).

Compounding the problem of access to care, over one-third of the State's population lives more than five miles from a store that sells benzoyl peroxide products (Outlandia Department of Health, 2010).

A Call to Action

As the most widespread, chronic adolescent health condition, acne is costly to youth, families, and the state. Statewide efforts to prevent acne and increase access to dermatologic care are critical to improve the dermatologic health of adolescents in Outlandia.

The Outlandia Department of Health (ODH) has undertaken two important initiatives in an effort to improve adolescents’ dermatologic health. A pilot program to distribute facial cleansers to high schools is intended to encourage students to wash their faces after physical education classes. The ODH also is educating health care providers about the importance of early detection and treatment for acne, as well as the need to collect and maintain dermatologic information within general health records.

These initiatives are important first steps toward addressing the silent epidemic of adolescent acne in Outlandia. But further action is necessary to improve access to dermatologic health care. The Secretary of Health's Report on Adolescents' Dermatologic Health in Outlandia (2010) calls on policymakers and health professionals to:

- Increase the number of dermatology graduates,
- Create incentives for dermatology graduates to practice in underserved communities,
- Provide ongoing education about dermatology to pediatric primary care providers, and
- Promote insurance coverage for dermatologic health services.

Support for these efforts will significantly improve the physical and emotional health of Outlandia's youth.
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Effects of Untreated Acne

- Infection
- Overly-long bangs
- Poor body image
- Low self-esteem
- Low social status
- Poor school attendance

Sources: Acne Eradication Program, 2009; Reinhardt and Callahan, 2007
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