

Bicuspid blues? Dental visits dip across U.S., not in Iowa

By Jim Offner December 17, 2011



Dr. Anne Hennessey looks over Jim Gilgen's teeth during a checkup Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2011, at Hennessey's office on University Avenue in Cedar Falls. (MATTHEW PUTNEY / Courier Photo Editor)

[Buy this photo](#)

Across the nation, the recession has delivered a veritable blow to the teeth to the dental business. Revenue at U.S. dental offices has dropped steadily over the last three years, according to financial data from nearly 8,000 practices collected by Sageworks Inc., a financial analysis firm in North Carolina.

Sageworks reported that patients are skipping twice-a-year cleanings, postponing fillings and bypassing root canals.

In other words, Americans are coming to see dental care as a luxury, Sageworks reported, even while noting that neglecting dental care can lead to health hazards, including heart disease.

Dentists say many patients no longer can tap equity in their homes to pay for implants and other elective treatments. Bank financing for dental work, long a popular way to pay for care, has dried up as lenders stiffened loan standards.

This year is shaping up to be the worst since 2005, according to Sageworks. In the first nine months of 2011, dentists have reported an average 3 percent decline in revenue and profit.

Not so, in Iowa, according to statewide dental industry officials.

"I think on a grand scale, just as the recession hasn't impacted Iowa as across the country, I can kind of make that same statement about dentists in Iowa," said Dr. Ed Schooley, dental director with Delta Dental in Johnston. "Certainly, they have impacted it a little bit. Anecdotally, offices on the eastern side of the state may be impacted more than on the western side. But, I think agribusiness has been a good support to the economy here, and it seems, as we speak today, dental offices have kind of weathered the storm and productivity seems to be kind of re-approaching normal levels."

Schooley did acknowledge that some aspects of dental care are taking a hit.

"I think what you're seeing that major services have kind of fallen flat or decreased a little bit, as opposed to medical care, where you really can't put off medical care, where it could be life or death," he said. "Where medical issues go, you don't have a choice. But in dentistry, you can put that crown off. You're not going to die from it. So, certainly, it is an item that can be delayed and I think you see that more when the economy is flat."

Dr. Anne Hennessey, a dentist in Cedar Falls, says she is as busy as ever.

"Truthfully, I haven't seen any problems this year or last year," said Hennessey, who has owned her practice since 1995. "I don't know if that has anything to do with the economy or the people moving in, but my income is staying fairly steady. I usually see about 20 to 30 new patients a month."

Optional cosmetic work has declined, perhaps due to economic pressures on consumers, said Larry Carl, executive director of the Des Moines-based Iowa Dental Association, which represents 90 percent of the licensed dentists in the state.

"But the normal restorative work and preventive work, there might be some dips in certain dips in the state, but they're not substantial; it's pretty steady," he said. "That's not to say dentists don't have capacity to take on additional patients, but they're running fairly normally."

There is a correlation between regular dental visits and insurance coverage, Schooley said.

"If you're insured, you'll be accessing more services," he said. "Those with coverage access dental visits almost twice more frequently than those that are uninsured, so dental coverage certainly will play a role and those with coverage will go through with the treatments."

Hennessey noted that insurance covers many preventative-maintenance services, which feeds the flow of regular visits.

"People with insurance are really good about coming in for regular maintenance," she add, adding about three-quarters of her patients have dental coverage."

For the full story featuring Sageworks' private industry data, please visit [The Waterloo Cedar Falls Courier - Bicuspid blues? Dental visits dip across U.S., not in Iowa.](#)