



American
Association of
Orthodontists®

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Orthodontists on the Hill: “Patients Need Access to Quality Care”

AAO Members Advocate for Patient Health and Safety

Washington, D.C., February 28, 2023 – More than 100 members of the American Association of Orthodontists (AAO) from around the country arrived in the nation's capital this week to meet with lawmakers from their states and advocate for policies that protect patients.

“In the last few years, I’ve noticed a rising trend of patients coming in for treatment after they either had no improvement or end up in a worse situation than when they started ‘mail-order orthodontic’ orthodontic treatments,” said **Dr. Lineberry**, who sees patients in her practices in and around Boise, Idaho. “This happens because these are not patients whose problems may not be appropriate for ‘direct-to-consumer’ orthodontic treatments.”

During its Professional Advocacy Conference, the AAO, which represents 19,000 orthodontist members throughout the United States, Canada, and abroad, is gathering advocates to make their voices heard on behalf of several policies that will protect patients from practices that reduce quality of care and safety. Members of the organization are dental specialists and health care providers who diagnose, prevent, intercept, and treat dental and facial irregularities. The AAO says it strongly supports codifying specific elements of a standard of care into law they reasonably believe necessary to protect patients.

In a survey of its members, Nov. 23, 2022, through Dec. 31, 2022, the majority of AAO respondents said they have seen patients come into their offices for retreatment due to harm caused by mail-order orthodontics without an initial examination: a total of 77 percent, with 56 percent of respondents reporting seeing such patients at least once per quarter (with a margin of error of +/- 4 points).

Dedicated to improving the health of the public by promoting quality orthodontic care, the importance of oral health care and its impact on overall health, the AAO hopes lawmakers throughout the country will work to address:

- **Mail-order Orthodontic Concerns:** Ensuring all orthodontic patients receive safe, effective, quality orthodontic care, including protecting patients from the risks of mail-order orthodontic treatment models
- **Workforce Challenges:** Creating solutions to address the severe workforce shortage challenges in the dental community and burdensome regulations for dental auxiliary who practice in orthodontic offices
- **Small Businesses Issues:** Fostering orthodontic offices, which are often small businesses in their communities, by preventing overburdensome regulations that negatively impact small businesses and prevent orthodontists from providing quality care to their communities
- **\$567,000 Average Student Loan Debt:** Easing the burden of student loan debt, and thereby increasing the public's access to orthodontic care, through the repeal of origination fees, federal refinancing of student loans, and allowing for residency interest deferments
- **FSA Solutions:** Improving health care policy by increasing the cap on FSA contributions and "use-it-or-lose-it" rule to allow patients to save more for their own health care needs and actively plan for medical expenses in the future without fear of forfeiting or wasting funds
- **Medically Necessary Treatments:** Ensuring that group and individual health plans do not deny or delay medically necessary treatments, including orthodontic treatment of congenital anomalies, that improve the health of countless Americans
- **Access to Quality Care:** Maximizing technology and teledentistry while protecting patient health and safety through necessary in-person examinations to ensure access to quality care.

Access to quality care remains a priority for the AAO, which advocates for making orthodontic treatment accessible, including use of teledentistry when combined with necessary in-person treatment while maintaining the highest standard of care to protect patients. The AAO advocates for policies that break through geographic, financial and convenience barriers. AAO's recent public policy survey also indicates that 70% of respondents said they voluntarily provide no-cost orthodontic treatment services to patients lacking access to care.

"As an orthodontic educator, private practitioner, and member of an underrepresented minority group, I am extremely familiar with the issue of access to care," said **Dr. Kelton Stewart**, AAO Member and Program Director at the Indiana University Orthodontic Residency Program.

"Throughout my professional career, I have practiced in low socioeconomic areas and actively sought to improve patient access to quality orthodontic care. There is much more work ahead of us to ensure that individuals from any walk of life can receive orthodontic treatment. I think that the prudent utilization of emerging technologies could be one strategy that could allow us to provide care to individuals who have historically been unable to obtain orthodontic care. However, these individuals must receive care that meets the standard set by the profession. Access to care that is not equivalent in safety or quality is not truly access to care."

Often promoted as “easy” and “affordable,” some providers portray treatment (especially straightening only the front teeth) as only “cosmetic.” But the research clearly shows that moving teeth is a medical procedure that involves complex biological processes and should be monitored in-person by a trained dental professional. Yet with some companies offering orthodontic treatment through clear aligners mailed directly to the patient, the patient is never examined in-person by the supervising dentist or orthodontist.

Moving teeth has a profound effect on alignment of the bite, and oral functions like chewing, speaking, and movement of the jaw. Dental boards, attorneys general, and state legislatures throughout the United States are paying attention and have expressed concern that patients who elect to receive orthodontic treatment without appropriate clinical safeguards may not be adequately protected.

“Patients often come to my practice because they want a pretty smile,” added **Dr. Lineberry**. “But as oral health professionals, we are responsible for looking at every part of a patient’s mouth to understand how alignment, wear, roots and structure can affect a patient in the long term. If a provider of orthodontic treatment focuses solely on cosmetic issues without considering these other important factors, they put the patient at risk for an adverse outcome.”

For more information on these minimum standards of care and the scientific evidence supporting them, please visit www.orthofacts.org.

About the American Association of Orthodontists

The American Association of Orthodontists (AAO) represents 19,000 orthodontist members throughout the United States, Canada and abroad. Founded in 1900, AAO is the world's oldest and largest dental specialty organization. AAO is dedicated to ethically advancing the art and science of orthodontics and dentofacial orthopedics worldwide; improving the overall oral healthcare of the public; advocating for the health and safety of the public; educating the public about the benefits of orthodontic treatment provided by an orthodontic specialist. For more information, visit www.aainfo.org.

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