

Use It or Lose It...

Over the last couple of weeks, I found myself wandering through Austin and San Antonio running various errands and doing a little Christmas shopping. Amazing as it sounds, we men can sometimes get our gifts well in advance of December 24th. For an extra five bucks, we can even have them wrapped beautifully. For me, that is a huge service because most of my gift wrapping turns out to look like a wadded up lump of gift paper and scotch tape headed for the recycle bin. If I don't have someone else do the wrapping, my presents have been known to be mistaken for trash accidentally thrown under the tree. As usual, I digress.

While driving around the big city I couldn't help but notice several signs at dental offices that said things like "Don't lose your 2008 insurance" or "Maximize your 2008 benefits before its too late" or "Free root canals tomorrow." Actually, I didn't see that third one, but you could imagine what it'd be like if I did. I'll freely admit dental humor is not for everyone.

So what are these signs talking about? I'll try to explain. Please bear with me, as I'm no expert on insurance. Add disclaimer here.

Most dental insurance plans have a maximum yearly amount that they will pay out, usually somewhere between one thousand to twenty-five hundred dollars. The maximum amount is usually based on how much everyone (employer and patient) wants to pay into the plan each year. This maximum benefit amount ensures that the insurance company does not have to pay out more benefits than are paid in by you and your employer. Modern dental plans are not so much insurance as they are forced savings and reduced fee schedules, or a combination of both. Patients and employers are not "insuring" their teeth as much as they are putting money in a "pot" to be used up before the end of the plan year.

In other words, use it all up or the insurance company gets to keep the leftovers. The good news is that a new plan year (most plans work on a calendar year, but some do not) resets the benefits and gives us a new maximum to work with. The bad news is that if you have seven hundred dollars left on your benefits on December 31st, they do not roll over and increase your 2009 benefits by seven hundred dollars. This would make way too much sense, for you to get what you paid for and all.

If you have dental insurance, thank your employer because it is an expensive benefit that seems to be going by the wayside. No matter what you may think of your plan, it should still provide some help with the cost of dental treatment. Insurance companies have a right to a living, just like you and I. Just try to leave as little of your money on the table as possible.

Until next time, keep smiling.

-Comments can be sent to Drs. Parrish at ParrishDental@aol.com.