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## Dental therapists to bridge gaps in oral care

by [Rupa Shenoy](#), Minnesota Public Radio  
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St. Paul, Minn. — Thousands of Minnesotans don't have dental insurance coverage or access to a dentist. For many people, the nearest dentist is hours away. Many others just can't afford to see one.

Earlier this year, state legislators sought to address the problems by passing a law creating a new kind of dental professional -- the dental therapist.

Dental therapists will be the dental equivalent of a physician's assistant. They'll provide more services than dental hygienists, but won't be able to do everything a dentist can.

The dental therapists will be required to work in areas where there aren't enough dentists -- thereby bringing access to communities that need it. Seeing a dental therapist won't cost as much as a visit to the dentist, so more poor people will be able to afford dental care.

The University of Minnesota enrolled its first class of future dental therapists earlier this month. All nine students say they were drawn to the new profession because of its focus on the poor.

Megan Meyer left her job as an assistant at a St. Paul dental clinic to join the program.

"It's a constant issue," she said. "People come in who are homeless, who don't have enough money for services. We work on a sliding scale fee there, so we talk a lot to patients about increasing access to care and ways they can get dental care for less money."

Most of the students will train for two and a half years to earn a master's degree. Students training as dentists, by comparison, take about four years to earn a doctoral degree.

U of M School of Dentistry Dean Patrick Lloyd says this first class of dental therapy students is the beginning of a solution to Minnesota's need for dental healthcare providers.



*Dental therapists*

"Under our model, where the dental therapist and the dentists are caring for patients side-by-side, the public can have trust that they will be taken care of well, there will be one standard, there will be ready access to fully trained professionals so when there is a need to get the full support of a dentist, they're right there," he said. "They're working together to provide the highest quality of care regardless of income."

Dental therapists will be restricted to providing relatively simple services like filling cavities, instructing patients in oral hygiene, and performing dietary evaluations and oral cancer screenings.

They won't have to work in the same office as a dentist. But the dental therapists will be monitored by a dentist who's either on- or off-site.

Brandi Tweeter is a single mother of two who considered training to be a dentist, but the shorter dental therapy program fit her schedule better. She worked as an assistant in a rural clinic serving migrant farm workers in the southwest Minnesota town of Montevideo.

"We see the kids -- we see the whole family come in when they come for appointments but we never get to see the adults. And more often than not, all they can afford is an extraction rather than saving their teeth," she said. "There are so many that can't even get an appointment because if they have Minnesota-based insurance or state-funded they aren't accepted in regular clinics anymore, so they have to travel 2-3 hours to be seen."



*White coats*

Tweeter plans to return to the Montevideo clinic. Once she does, it will accept more patients on state healthcare. She says it'll be a relief to not have to tell patients who come in with a toothache that they have to drive for hours to be treated.

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