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Lee Jess: Lynch's plan is bad for patients

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As leaders of state and national dental professional associations, we are very concerned about a plan to create a new mid-level dental worker position in Minnesota. While, in theory, such a worker may increase access to oral health care for underserved Minnesotans, this unprecedented position has to be rigorously educated and properly supervised to have such an impact.

A proposal for this position by Sen. Ann Lynch is the wrong plan for Minnesota. It creates a mid-level dental position that could be trained at any community college or university in the state. It also does not require a dentist to be in the building when the most complicated, surgical procedures are being performed by this new worker. Legislators should reject this faulty and ill-advised plan.

First, the educational element: The University of Minnesota School of Dentistry is the only institution in the entire state accredited to teach surgical dental procedures. Allowing this position to be trained at any other school in Minnesota does a disservice to the worker's education and to the rural and low-income populations they will

eventually serve.

Second, Lynch's plan is unrealistic in its requirements for supervision. Specifically, it allows the mid-level dental worker to perform irreversible, surgical procedures without a dentist anywhere in the building. This plan simply does not recognize the realities and uncertainties in dental care delivery. For example, a tooth extraction may look straightforward at first glance but could become much more critical once the surgery begins and complications are discovered beneath the gum's surface. This new worker will only have a few years of training and is not equipped to handle the multitude of problems that could arise. When a mid-level worker performs any surgical procedures, a dentist must be on-site to help out or take over the procedure if the patient's circumstances warrant it.

There is another dental worker plan. The University of Minnesota School of Dentistry has a proposal to create a dental therapist position that would be educated at the university alongside dental students and be supervised by dentists when performing the most complicated procedures, like surgical ones. This is a good plan that provides a solid educational foundation for the worker and provides safe, quality care for underserved populations.

We fully support the creation of this new mid-level dental position, which will specifically focus on serving the low-income and rural populations

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in our state. We hope that this position will expand access for many people and allow them to receive quality dental care. But the Legislature and the entire dental community have a responsibility to ensure that these new workers are trained at a qualified institution and are supervised in a way that ensures effectiveness of their work and safety for the patient.

DR. LEE JESS, PRESIDENT, MINNESOTA DENTAL ASSOCIATION; AND Brenda Spanovich, president, and Natalie Kaweckyj, vice president, American Dental Assistants Association.

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