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Prettner Solon dental bill would benefit patients

Two bills being considered in the Minnesota Legislature are an attempt to address the state's lack of access to oral health care.

By: Dr. Stephen L'Abbe, Duluth News Tribune

Sen. Yvonne Prettner Solon was right on target Sunday with her commentary in response to the News Tribune editorial page question: Should Minnesota open up a new level of dental care?

Two bills being considered in the Minnesota Legislature are an attempt to address the state's lack of access to oral health care. State-funded public programs now available fail to reimburse dental health professionals at a level where they can deliver services without incurring financial losses. This, in turn, has reduced providers and diminished access for those in need.

The Legislature is attempting to resolve this problem by creating a type of midlevel practitioner who can more economically deliver services. Those currently in the dental profession recognize that a midlevel practitioner would incur the same overhead and hence would in most cases not be able to deliver a quality service for a lesser cost.

As the Legislature moves forward, distinct differences between the two bills being considered need to be examined.

The oral health practitioner bill introduced by Sen. Ann Lynch, DFL-Rochester, has the ability to compromise patient safety; practitioners would be allowed to deliver services without the onsite supervision of a licensed dentist. The proposed bill lacks the majority blessing of the Minnesota Board of Dentistry. It does not provide for curriculum accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation, as the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry offers in its programs. And the work-group recommendations that led to the bill did not come unanimously.

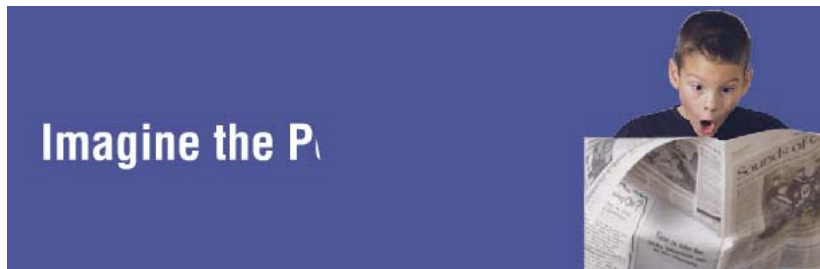
We also could recognize, too, that we do not live in the remote outlying Canadian frozen tundra or in some other underdeveloped area where said programs exist.

The dental therapy bill carried by Sen. Solon would provide a proper curriculum with established faculty. Patient safety would be assured with licensed dentists present for any unforeseen event. The bill would require therapists to have at least 50 percent of their patients on public programs or who meet the definition of underserved.

Sen. Solon's proposed bill is the logical and prudent course to establish this new member to the dental team.

Dr. Stephen L'Abbe DDS of Duluth is president of the Northeast District Dental Society.

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