

Mid-level 'dental therapists' could lower the cost of care

Dentistry's version of nurse practitioners, called dental therapists, might soon fill your cavities.

A Board of Regents committee on Thursday approved creating two dental therapy degree programs. Meanwhile, legislators introduced bills that would license the people who graduate from them.

A step between a hygienist and a dentist, a dental therapist would be allowed to pull teeth, place sealants and do some other procedures now only performed by dentists.

The U's programs — one a bachelor's and one a master's — could accept their first 10 students this fall, said Patrick Lloyd, dean of the School of Dentistry.

Supporters say having mid-level dental practitio-

ners would expand access to affordable dental care, especially in rural areas.

Dental therapists "would be able to practice with a lower level of education debt. They'd have a different expectation for salary," Lloyd told the committee Thursday. "So the drive is not just to create more providers but to ... effectively reduce the cost of care."

The bill allowing dental therapists to practice requires half of their work to be dedicated to serving "patients of poverty" in Minnesota, said Rep. Kim Norton, DFL-Rochester, who introduced the bill in the House.

The full Board of Regents will vote on the committee's recommendation today.

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