

Dentists' concerns shape new dental position

By Lee Jess

Many communities are facing problems with access to dental care: perhaps they are a low-income community that struggles with the ability to pay for care or a rural community that may have too few dentists in the area. To ensure every Minnesotan has access, the Legislature sought a new approach to expanding access while maintaining health care quality.

In the next few years, a new position, called the dental therapist, will be added to your local dental team. While we were initially concerned about the safety of the scope of practice for this new worker, the Minnesota Dental Association was at the table to ensure that important patient protections were established.

These important patient protections, negotiated by the Minnesota Dental Association, ensure safe, high-quality dental care for Minnesota's low-income and underserved populations. Most importantly, this position may help improve access for Minnesotans.

This new position will provide oral health care to Minnesota's low-income and underserved populations. The dental therapist will be allowed to perform basic restorative procedures with the onsite supervision of a dentist. With additional training, a dental therapist can qualify as an advanced dental therapist and perform these procedures outside of the dental office with the permission of the supervising dentist. To ensure patient safety, these new dental team members will have a strong supervisory relationship with a dentist who can step in if a procedure becomes too

complex.

The dental therapist and advanced dental therapist positions are only part of the solution to Minnesota's access problem. Many Minnesotans suffer from ailments that go beyond the scope of what a dental therapist or advanced dental therapist will be trained to do.

Minnesota's dental community has developed and will continue to lead many successful programs to provide dental care to low-income and underserved individuals, from the Critical Access Dental Provider program, to the Donated Dental Services program, to the Give Kids a Smile program.

In addition, Minnesota dentists will continue to help establish dental care options community by community throughout the state, seek financial assistance for graduating dentists who choose to practice in underserved areas, advocate for adequate funding for public dental programs, and seek to streamline the administration of public dental programs.

Most importantly, the MDA will work to ensure that dental therapists are serving those most in need and are providing safe, quality dental care to rural and low-income populations with the best training possible.

Ultimately, Minnesota must find the political will to fund a dental health system in which the people in greatest need, and who also have the most complex oral health needs, can get care from fully trained dentists.

Dr. Lee Jess is president of the Minnesota Dental Association. He practices in Grand Rapids.

