

Train hygienists to provide care beyond basic cleaning

By Sen. Ann Lynch

In order to help address the growing crisis of dental care access, last year I helped pass a bill that will create a new oral health practitioner, much like a nurse practitioner.

This proposal was recommended by the Legislative Commission on Health Care Access as a way to reduce health care costs and improve health outcomes. This is a reform that will save us money and in this time of such economic distress, ideas like this should be embraced.



Lynch

In May 2008, the Minnesota Department of Human Services issued a "Report to the Legislature — Critical Access Dental Program — Results and Recommendations." Among the recommendations to the Legislature was that consideration should be given to "alternative dental workforce models which are effective in increasing access to dental care."

The report goes on to say that, "Workforce models which are in existence in Alaska and numerous foreign countries have been shown to be effective in reducing oral health disparities and access to care problems. These models could serve as an effective means to increase access to dental care in Minnesota."

I am proud of the University of Minnesota and the in-roads it has made to train dentists who practice in underserved areas, but clearly we need a more expansive solution. Loan forgiveness programs are already in place, but they fall well short of making any substantial impact on student debt.

There has been extensive research done on the effectiveness of the program, and it has been implemented in several countries and the state of Alaska. I am confident that Minnesota State Colleges and Universities and the University of Minnesota will provide well-trained, competent individuals, as they have proven and provided to us in so many, many disciplines.

Thousands of people across Minnesota,

especially vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, low-income and special-needs populations, cannot access the dental care they so desperately need. Patients in rural areas often wait many months to see a dentist, even for serious conditions.

Hospital emergency rooms are seeing thousands of repeat patients with unresolved dental problems. According to 2006 data, there are well over 20,000 visits to Minnesota emergency rooms for the purpose of addressing dental health problems. The cost to Minnesota taxpayers and Minnesota Hospitals is unacceptable.

This problem will only get worse over the next 15-20 years, when 60 percent of practicing dentists in Minnesota are projected to retire.

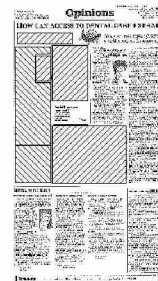
The bill I introduced last year was passed unanimously by the Minnesota Senate and

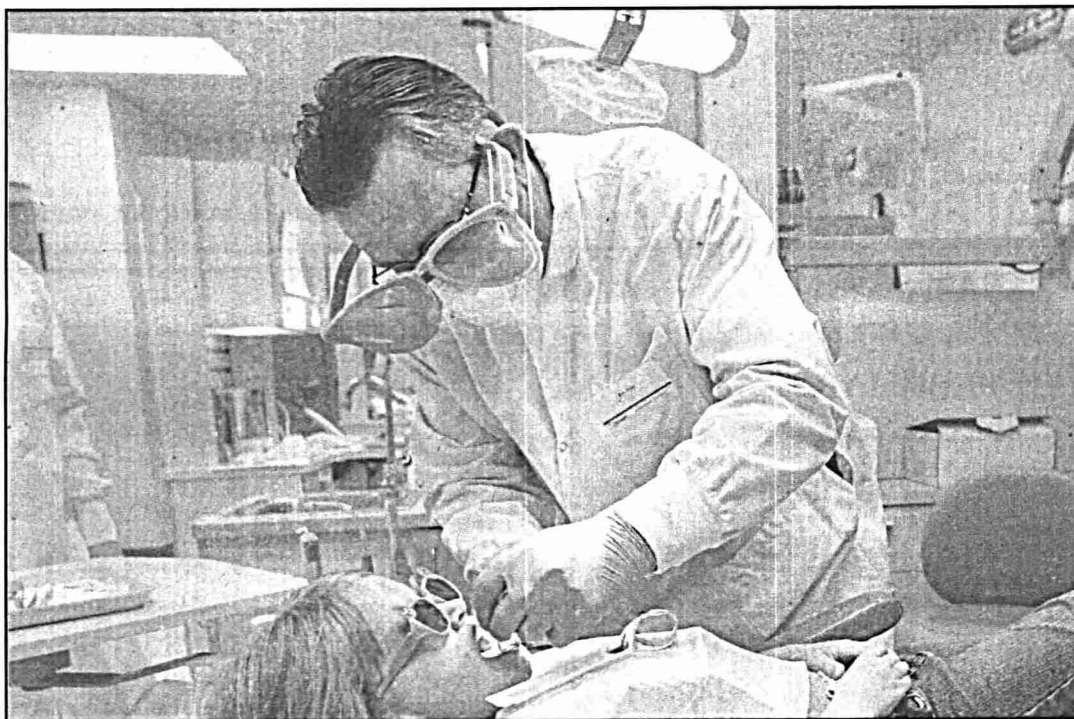
was signed into law by Gov. Pawlenty. As a result, the Minnesota Department of Health convened a work group that has made recommendations on the scope of practice, licensure and regulatory requirements, education programs and curricula, dentist supervision requirements and other issues related to development of a new oral health practitioner. Before March 1, I will introduce a bill that follows the recommendations of the work group as we work toward making the mid-level practitioner a reality.

The mid-level practitioner will be an additional tool for the oral health team. Utilization of a mid-level practitioner is a voluntary option for dentists. Licensed Minnesota dentists may choose to bring this practitioner on to their team. All oral health practitioners must operate under a collaborative agreement that delineates their duties and all expectations of their service, including a plan for consultation, supervision and emergency care.

It really is about solving a growing problem and ensuring that no one in Minnesota has to use an emergency room to take care of their tooth ache. We need to take action now. We can't afford to wait.

Sen. Ann Lynch is a DFLer from Rochester. She is in her first term in the Minnesota Senate.





Post-Bulletin file photo

Many children in Rochester don't have dental insurance or easy access to dental care but the problem is much greater in rural areas of Minnesota — which is why two Rocheste legislators are pursuing plans that would put more dental practitioners in the field.