

Our view: Need more dentists? Educate more dentists

Rather than training dental practitioners alongside dental students at the University of Minnesota, why not increase the number of dental students allowed in?

By: **Our view**, Duluth News Tribune



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In rural Minnesota and the state's poorer urban areas, finding dental care can be as painful as a root canal without Novocain.

Sure, the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry requires students to serve stints in underserved areas. But after graduation, most opt for practices in urban and affluent areas. And who can blame them? Offices tend to be more modern, hassles with patients who can't or won't pay less frequent, and the potential to earn fatter paychecks more realistic.

Meanwhile, the underserved remain underserved, many of them winding up in overburdened emergency rooms when toothache pain becomes intolerable.

This session, the Minnesota Legislature is considering a possible solution. Two bills, each representing a different version of the same idea, are working through the lawmaking process. Their authors, Democratic Sens. Yvonne Prettner Solon of Duluth and Ann Lynch of Rochester, argue their proposals on today's page.

Both measures aim to create a new dental position in Minnesota, a not-quite dentist who'd be known as an oral health practitioner, or OHP. The practitioners, as school of dentistry officials explained to the News Tribune editorial board last fall, would perform routine dental duties but also would be allowed to drill and fill cavities, pull children's teeth and perform other "irreversible" surgical procedures.

Practitioner jobs could be located in underserved areas, increasing dental access.

And fully educated dentists would be required to be present with practitioners because they'd have only "a few years of training" and wouldn't be "equipped to handle the multitude of problems that could arise," as Prettner Solon explains in her commentary.

Though the proposals are well intended, unassailable reasons exist why no other state has tried this before, though oral health practitioner jobs do exist in Canada, New Zealand and in other countries.

Letting a dental professional with fewer years of school than a dentist perform “irreversible” surgical procedures sounds as shrill as the cry of a drill. And because dentists would be required to be present when practitioners work, areas now lacking sufficient dental care would remain in need. That includes stretches of the Northland.

There is another solution to Minnesota’s dental drain. Rather than training dental practitioners alongside dental students at the University of Minnesota, why not increase the number of dental students allowed in? Many applicants rejected now simply because there aren’t enough spaces would jump at being accepted with an agreement to practice for a time in rural or otherwise underserved areas. Other graduates could be enticed to practice in such places with tuition forgiveness or other financial incentives. Remember ultra-urban Dr. Fleischman agreeing to practice in a moose-filled Alaska town in the 1990s TV series “Northern Exposure?” Despite his weekly whining about it, the arrangement worked out.

As the News Tribune editorial page argued in September, solving the state’s dental access problem is critical. But the fix doesn’t have to include an idea untested anywhere in the United States — especially when some of the procedures involved are “irreversible.”