

Free market will choose dental practitioner plan

It's not every day that one DFL legislator from Rochester openly opposes a bill introduced by another DFLer from Rochester, but that's precisely the case right now.

Sen. Ann Lynch is the author of a bill that would authorize the creation of an oral health practitioner program that would train licensed dental hygienists to perform a variety of dental services. The goal is to make it easier for low-income patients and patients in rural areas of Minnesota to receive timely dental care. These practitioners would be allowed to diagnose dental problems, fill cavities, pull adult teeth and prescribe some pain medications.

The Minnesota Dental Association strongly opposes this idea, as does Rep. Kim Norton. But that doesn't mean she and the MDA don't acknowledge the problem of dental access. Norton is the author of a House bill that would create a new four-year program and a master's degree program at the University of Minnesota to train dental therapists. Graduates of this program would have much tighter restrictions on what they could do — and would need a licensed dentist on site to perform even routine surgical procedures, such as filling a cavity.

The differences between the two proposals are fairly obvious. Lynch's plan, because it would start with trained hygienists, would theoretically be able to get practitioners into the field more quickly, and would empower them to provide more services with less direct supervision from licensed dentists. Metropolitan State University is ready to launch the degree program, at no cost to the state.

Norton's plan puts a much greater emphasis on patient safety, but

because the U of M would first need to create a new degree program — at a cost of \$930,000 — it would take longer to produce any practitioners. And, due to the strict supervisory requirements, we're somewhat skeptical that it would result in easier, closer access to dental care in rural areas of Minnesota. If there is only one dentist in a 300-square mile area of northeast Minnesota, Norton's proposal wouldn't cut one mile off of people's travel to get a cavity filled.

Which plan will prevail? It's possible that both will become law. Lynch's Senate bill has been amended, and now includes Norton's proposal as well. In the House, Norton's bill and the companion to Lynch's proposal are proceeding as separate plans, but they're both alive and won't necessarily be treated as either/or proposals.

That might be the best possible result, because then the market would determine which plan succeeds. Aspiring dental practitioners would weigh the merits and future employment opportunities of each degree program and choose accordingly.

Only then — after the first graduates have received their credentials — will we learn the answer to the million-dollar question: Are Minnesotans willing to have someone other than a fully licensed dentist fill their cavities or pull their children's teeth?

When the alternatives are a pain-filled night or a visit to the emergency room, then we believe the answer will be "Yes." And regardless of which kind of practitioners help alleviate that pain, Lynch deserves full credit for drawing attention to this issue.

OUR VIEW





Post-Bulletin file photo

Dr. John Flor cares for a patient with help from a registered dental assistant Tami Brooks at the Main Street Dental Clinic in Blooming Prairie.