

## University of Minnesota reviewing applications for nation's first dental school-based dental therapy program

By Karen Fox

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*Minneapolis*—Dr. Patrick M. Lloyd, dean of the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry, is well aware of the gravity associated with educating the first group of individuals in the nation to perform procedures that up to now were provided only by licensed dentists.

But he and the school's faculty who have researched dental therapy education programs that thrive in other countries made clear that above all, educating dentists and dental therapists side-by-side is the key to long-term success.

"Dental therapy students educated with dental students develop a collegial relationship and an appreciation for each other's skill sets, and are ultimately able to practice together more effectively," said Dr. Lloyd. "Training side-by-side assures one standard of education and one standard of competency."


That is one reason he was satisfied with the signing of Senate File 2083 in Minnesota last month.

"I think we reached a compromise in the legislation that will enhance the capacity of dental offices throughout Minnesota to see more underserved patients and serve citizens of our state well," said Dr. Lloyd.

"I was pleased that we now have a single name—dental therapy—for the discipline, one that is consistent with what is used elsewhere in the world," he continued. "It's a title the public can understand, one that distinguishes dental therapists from other members of the dental team, acknowledges a distinct knowledge base for the discipline and gives dental therapists credibility."

The U of M School of Dentistry will begin training dental therapists in September of this year. There will be two programs—a bachelor's of science and a master of dental therapy—which have identical didactic and clinical education and the same license to practice. The differences are the program length and the secondary emphasis of the master program. The bachelor's program, of 40 months' duration, is an entry level degree. The 28-month master program is designed for someone who already has a bachelor's degree in dental therapy, is licensed as a dental therapist, has practiced for at least 2,000 hours as a dental therapist and has passed a board-approved exam to demonstrate competency.

"We look for these graduates to be the educators and leaders in the field of dental therapy," said Dean Lloyd.

The program curricula are posted on the school's Web site at [www.dentistry.umn.edu/programs\\_admissions/DentalTherapyPrograms/home.html](http://www.dentistry.umn.edu/programs_admissions/DentalTherapyPrograms/home.html) .

Licensed dental therapists will provide oral health education, and clinical and therapeutic services to patients, including basic preventive and restorative treatment and extraction of primary teeth, under a dentist's supervision. They will work primarily in dental offices and community settings that serve low-income and underserved patients or in dental-health professional shortage areas.

At press time, the governor had not finalized the state's budget, though cuts in education and health care were still being considered. SF 2083 provided no funding to create educational programs. In order to train dental therapists alongside dental students, the U of M School of Dentistry needs to be able to expand its facilities.

"We recognize the economic crisis causes significant challenges in the state right now, and were pleased that the University of Minnesota's Academic Health Center has been able to make commitments to support facility expansions and faculty recruitment independent of state funding," said Dr. Lloyd. "We would not be able to develop this program without new resources. This truly is an indication that the university supports innovation in health care delivery."

Applications for the 10 slots in the first dental therapy class have already been received and are under review by the school's dental therapy admissions committee. The university has begun promoting dental therapy as a career option through its health careers center, too.

Dr. Lloyd said the advanced dental therapist program, which enables a dental therapist with additional education and training to provide surgical procedures under the general supervision of a dentist, will need time to determine the education, curriculum, training sites and the second level of examination for the added credential. It will be four years before the first group of dental therapists has completed their education, so "we have time to deliberate and come up with well-thought out options" for advanced dental therapists, said Dr. Lloyd.

Now that a dental therapist law is on the books, it falls to the state dental board to develop standards for approving educational programs, licensing, and rules and regulations.

Other educational institutions will also have the opportunity to establish dental therapy programs in the state.