

Underserved people need reform done with care

By: **Sen. Yvonne Prettner Solon**, For the News Tribune

In a time of change and reform, Minnesota needs a clear vision and thoughtful planning to help carve out a path to becoming a stronger state. To that end, health care, and specifically access to dental care, is an issue that Minnesota can improve — if it's done right.

My colleagues at the Legislature and I are discussing a mid-level dental position that would be able to perform preventative and surgical procedures. The hope is that this first-in-the-nation position could help relieve parts of the dental-access problem and give more Minnesotans quality oral care — if it's done right.

I am chief author of SF 641, a bill which would create a midlevel dental therapist position that would be educated at the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry. Graduates would be able to provide a range of preventative and basic surgical procedures to underserved populations throughout the state and be supervised by a dentist in a way that ensures safety for the patient and flexibility for the worker. This bill is backed by the University of Minnesota Dental School, the Minnesota Dental Association and the Minnesota Dental Assistants Association. And it is consistent with the position of the Board of Dentistry.

Requiring these never-before-tried dental therapists to be educated alongside dental students would create a solid foundation from which to grow the dental team. Furthermore, the University of Minnesota is the only institution in the state accredited to teach dental-surgical procedures.

Once in the work force, my plan requires a dentist to be on-site whenever a dental therapist performs a surgical procedure. This is just good dentistry and common sense. Dentists have recalled countless situations to me where a procedure that seemed “simple” quickly turned into a dental emergency. This new worker will only have a few years of training and is not equipped to handle the multitude of problems that could arise. When a mid-level worker performs any surgical procedures, a dentist must be on-site to help out or take over the procedure if the patient's circumstances warrant it. SF 641 accounts for the paramount concern of patient safety while expanding access to those who need it the most.

Other groups at the Legislature are trying to make this new dental worker position as broad as possible, allowing these professionals to perform complicated, irreversible procedures without a dentist nearby — and even allowing them to be educated at any community college or university. This is unacceptable and the wrong way to expand dental care.

Instead, we need a clear vision of what the position will look like and thoughtful planning to ensure more Minnesotans have access to quality oral health care.

We should be proud that Minnesota is blazing the way in this new area, but we need to get it right. We must create a new dental worker who is trained at the only qualified institution in the state and then supervised in a common-sense and effective way, ensuring that Minnesotans get the dental care they deserve while strengthening and expanding the entire dental team.

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