

# FINANCE AND COMMERCE

## Business News

April 22, 2009

### State dental association targets 'oral health practitioner' bills

by [Bob Geiger](#) Staff Writer

The Minnesota Dental Association's new ad campaign, designed to take the bite out of legislation that would create a mid-level class of dental practitioners, is drawing fire from critics who say campaign amounts to scare tactics.

The print and online ads, which debuted last week, target bills moving through the House and Senate that would allow oral health practitioners (OHPs) to provide basic dental services, with supervision by or collaboration with dentists. The print ads are headlined "The last thing you want to hear when you're getting dental care is 'uh-oh.'"

Supporters of the concept note that legislation creating mid-level dental-care providers was approved in Alaska last year, and that a similar model is used in more than 50 countries, including Canada and England.

And, critics say, the ad's bold-faced request, "Call your local legislator today and tell them that unsupervised workers doing dental surgery is a bad idea," oversimplifies the issue.

The Safety Net Coalition calls the MDA's campaign "misleading" and "sensational" because it implies that OHPs put patients at risk. The group claims that OHPs merely would serve low-income Minnesotans who have limited access to dental care.

Opponents of the bill warn of unsupervised OHPs performing such dental procedures as teeth-pulling without the medical training required for dentists – possibly causing irreversible damage and not being fully taught how to respond if dental complications arise.

St. Paul dentist Dr. Scott Lingle emphasized that dental practitioners, be they licensed dentists or OHPs, should have the same education to best ensure patient safety.

The current base of patients who would receive OHP training are dental hygienists, who typically have four-year baccalaureate degrees rather than classes required in dental school.

"It's like an architect; you don't build the building without a good plan," Lingle said. "There isn't one incorrect statement" in the ads.

Carol Embertson, a spokeswoman for the MDA, said the trade group's budget for running ads in the Twin Cities, Rochester and St. Cloud areas is "substantial," but would not disclose how much the MDA plans to spend on the campaign.

The MDA also has hired Bloomington public relations firm Tunheim Partners to assist its marketing effort, including the creation of the ad campaign.

State Sen. Ann Lynch, DFL-Rochester, is chief author of the Senate version of the bill, which was co-sponsored in the House by state Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul.

As for the print and online ads, which picture a concerned-looking man during a dental visit – as if he'd just heard the dentist say "uh-oh" during a procedure – Lynch said, "We have resorted to using fear tactics as a means for a policy-making.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "Let's remember that there was a similar campaign in Alaska when the mid-levels were created to work on the (American Indian) reservations there."

Lynch views her bill as making routine dental care accessible to people in rural areas where there aren't many, if any, dentists.

She likens the MDA's ad campaign sounding the alarm against OHPs to the medical industry's opposition to nurse practitioners, and emphasizes the primary role for OHPs as a bridge between dentists and dental hygienists – able to do a variety of dental procedures under a collaborative agreement with a licensed dentist.

Lynch's Senate version of the bill allowing OHPs to practice starting in 2012 currently is contained in the Omnibus Higher Education Appropriations bill, while Thao's bill, F.F. 535, awaits debate in the House.

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