

LEGISLATURE / DENTAL THERAPIST

Dental therapist could be new career

New professionals could provide basic care

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ST. PAUL — Having a cavity filled soon could get cheaper in Minnesota.

A Rochester lawmaker and the University of Minnesota are teaming up in an effort to create the first dental therapist program in the nation, creating a class of dental professionals who would provide basic dental care at a cheaper price.

Rep. Kim Norton, DFL-Rochester, is expected to introduce the bill today. The University of Minnesota's Board of Regents also is expected to vote today on approving a new four-year degree program.

Norton said she first became involved in the issue two years ago when she



Norton

discovered how difficult it can be for some Rochester residents to get access to basic dental care. Many dentists only treat a certain number of medical assistance patients because the state reimbursement is so low that they lose money.

The proposal calls for establishing a bachelor of science degree in dental therapy through the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry.

"We would train them right with the dentist students," said Patrick Lloyd, dean of the university's school of dentistry.

The Minnesota Dental Association

supports the proposal with the requirement that dentists be on site for surgical procedures, said Dick Diercks, the association's executive director.



Sen. Ann Lynch, DFL-Rochester, got legislation passed last year to create a work group to study a new dental position, oral health practitioner. It's different than Norton's plan.

Under Lynch's legislation, the oral health practitioner would be allowed to treat only underserved populations that most dentists don't treat.

Dental therapists would be trained to perform basic fillings in children and adults, apply sealant and fluoride and to pull primary teeth in children. Lloyd said having therapists would free up dentists to focus on more complicated treatment.

If the legislation is approved, the first class of 10 dental therapy students would be admitted this fall. The university is seeking \$930,000 to help pay for faculty and facilities.

Dan Marcell knows just how big the need for affordable dental care is in Rochester. The business coordinator for the Salvation Army's Good Samaritan Dental Clinic said it has been operating at capacity, serving more than 1,100 low-income patients last year in need of dental treatment.

Given the economy and the potential for cuts to dental assistance at the state, Marcell adds, "The need is going to be even greater."

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