

Compromise could improve access to dental care

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ST. PAUL -- It appears lawmakers and dental organizations have reached a compromise on a measure that would allow someone other than a dentist to fill cavities.

For two years, Sen. Ann Lynch, DFL-Rochester, has been pushing to create a mid-level dental practitioner, similar to the idea of a nurse practitioner, to help improve access to dental care. But her initial proposal ran in to strong opposition from the Minnesota Dental Association, concerned at the idea of these therapists pulling primary teeth without a dentist on site.

Fellow Rochester Democrat Rep. Kim Norton jumped into the debate this session offering her own bill creating a program backed by the dental association. This measure would have had much tighter restrictions on what these therapists could do and would require a dentist onsite for surgical procedures. It also would have required the program be done at the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry.

But after all the wrangling, it appears a solution has been reached. This would make Minnesota the first state in the nation to license dental therapists.

The measure is now part of a larger higher education funding bill. That bill still needs to pass the House and Senate and win the governor's support.

"This is really what health care reform looks like and how it happens," Lynch said. "In this case, we're going to be able to change the way we deliver services. We believe we are going to be able to help more people."

The compromise proposal creates a two levels -- a dental therapist and an advanced dental therapist. To be licensed, these therapists would have to complete a bachelor or master's degree program at an accredited school. They would be required to have a collaborative practice agreement with a licensed Minnesota dentist. The dental therapist would be more limited in the procedures they could perform.

To be an advanced dental therapist, applicants would have to have been practicing as a licensed dental therapist for at least a year, have a master's degree in a dental therapy program and have completed a minimum of 2,000 hours of advanced dental therapy clinical practice. They would be able to pull primary (adult) teeth in certain situations.

Dr. Mike Flynn, a Lewiston dentist speaking on behalf of the Minnesota Dental Association, said this proposal addresses the organization's major concerns regarding patient safety.

"I think it's a good compromise," he said. "It should be helpful for access."

Norton said she also backs the new proposal adding, " I think we have hit a really nice compromise."

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