

Readers Write for Monday, April 20

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DENTAL PRACTITIONERS

Minnesota needs these midlevel caregivers

Your April 16 editorial on proposals to license oral health practitioners and dental therapists rightly focused on the unmet dental care needs of thousands of Minnesotans and the decades of research on the safe and effective care delivered by similar practitioners in Alaska and internationally. The real issue is safe, reliable health care for Minnesotans, not trade associations' turf wars.

MnSCU fully supports both mid-level dental practitioner proposals. As you noted, Metropolitan State University's Master of Science program, taught by veteran dental educators, equips midcareer licensed practitioners to provide basic dental care in settings that previous initiatives have been unable to address -- schools, nursing homes, community clinics, homeless shelters, prisons, emergency rooms and rural communities.

The University of Minnesota program creates a pathway for those new to dental care and will increase the capacity of some existing dental clinics. Dentists' involvement with either model is entirely optional.

The current proposals are timely, since the number of Minnesota dentists who will soon be retiring is significantly higher, especially in underserved areas, than the number of new dentists entering the field. It is more important than ever for practicing dentists to work "at the top of their license," focusing on complex cases, including those referred to them by oral health practitioners.

This same model that has extended the reach of physicians by including nurse practitioners and physicians assistants in the health care team will work with the dental care team. Several progressive states are looking to Minnesota to further its leadership tradition.

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The Minnesota Dental Association is spending many advertising dollars to argue over the value of dentists. The question is not whether dentists are valuable. They probably are. The question is whether dental care is valuable. It definitely is.

Dentists are unable to provide dental care to all who need it. Many Medicaid-qualified seniors in nursing homes don't receive care because dentists don't want to serve them or enough dentists aren't available. It can be challenging to provide dental care to someone with Alzheimer's or other complex conditions.

The new midlevel oral health practitioner will fill a substantial need and improve health care.

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