

Groups sue to stop rural dental aides

PROGRAM: Tribal group, dentists at odds over new program.

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The American Dental Association wants a judge to stop people who aren't dentists from drilling and pulling teeth in rural Alaska.

The national professional association, along with the Alaska Dental Society, filed suit Tuesday in Superior Court against the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium and eight dental therapists performing services the association says violate state dental licensing laws.

"We believe that Alaska Natives are being placed at risk, unfairly and unnecessarily, by nondentists doing irreversible dental surgical procedures," said Dr. Robert Brandjord, a Minnesota oral surgeon and president of the American Dental Association speaking at the Hotel Captain Cook on Tuesday.

The lawsuit follows a decision of almost five months ago by the state attorney general's office that the work of the dental therapists, who receive two years of training, is legal.

The therapist program was created to address the shortage of dentists in rural Alaska. Studies say the rate of tooth decay among Alaska Native children is more than twice the national rate.

Thousands of rural Alaskans can receive dental care from these therapists, who aren't licensed by the state but are certified by a federal board and work for Native health clinics, the attorney general's decision said.

Nationally, Alaska is the only state with federal approval to use dental therapists to provide treatment, including filling cavities and removing teeth, as well as preventive care. Such therapists provide dental care in more than 40 countries around the world, said Dr. Ron Nagel, a dentist with the tribal health consortium who oversees the dental health aide program.

Dentists with the American Dental Association and representatives of the consortium held dueling press conferences Tuesday in downtown Anchorage. The association



Attorney Valerie Davidson, senior director of legal and intergovernmental affairs for the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, and Dr. Ron Nagel, D.D.S., dental consultant for the consortium, discuss the use of dental therapists in rural Alaska.

(Photo by BILL ROTH / Anchorage Daily News)



Brandjord ()

supports a dental aide program that provides only preventive care. They say dental therapists should not be performing procedures like extracting and drilling teeth and that only dentists should do that work.

Eight dental therapists work in villages surrounding Nome, Kotzebue and Bethel, Nagel said. Alaska's first therapists started work a year ago after graduating from special two-year programs taught at a university in New Zealand, where dental therapists have been trained for about a century.

Representatives from the nonprofit tribal consortium accused the dentists of putting their monopoly above patient care. Training and employing a new kind of health care provider -- the dental health aide -- is "a creative solution to a local problem," said Valerie Davidson, senior director of legal affairs for the consortium.

The two sides have been arguing about the future of the state's dental health aide program for more than two years. The new program is an expansion of a decades-old program that employs about 550 community health aides statewide. The community health aides offer medical care where doctors are scarce; the dental health aides offer dental care where dentists are scarce.

The American Dental Association wants dentists to provide this care in rural Alaska and is working with Native health corporations to bring volunteer dentists to remote villages for a couple of weeks at a time. Top state health officials, as well as Nagel, say it's been difficult to lure full-time dentists to rural Alaska and to keep them there. There's a 25 percent vacancy rate for dentists in the Alaska Native health system, Nagel said Tuesday.

The two sides also disagreed about whether any complaints have been filed against the therapists currently employed. Brandjord, with the dental association, cited two complaints but could offer no specifics. The state dental board said details were lacking with both complaints and that investigations were never opened.

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