

Dental training rouses protest

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RURAL ALASKA: Program allows therapists to pull teeth, fill cavities.

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State and national dentist groups have elevated their opposition to a new federally funded dental health care program for rural Alaska. They say it violates state law and have asked Gov. Frank Murkowski to challenge it in court as a matter of state sovereignty. Last January, the first graduates of a dental health-aide therapist program in New Zealand returned to clinics in Bethel and Kotzebue and began working toward their certification. Supporters say the new midlevel practitioners are necessary in areas of the Bush where dental health is among the worst in the United States.

Alaska's is the only program like this in the United States. Therapists can extract teeth, fill cavities and perform other operations formerly done only by state-licensed dentists. Because they operate under authority of the federal Indian Health Service, the therapists don't need a state license, program managers say.

"We respectfully disagree," said Jim Towle, executive director of the Alaska Dental Society. "People with very good intentions have come up with a solution (for rural dental needs) that is not in the best interest of patients, and our position is that it's not legal."

In a full-page ad in the Juneau Empire last week featuring the toothy maw of a brown bear, the society called the therapist program "2nd class dental care for Alaska Natives."

An accompanying open letter to Murkowski says the state "must challenge this violation of the State Practices Act" and urges him to "stand firmly for states' rights and equal-quality care for all Alaskans"

Letters earlier this year from the Alaska Board of Dental Examiners and the American Dental Association have asked the state Department of Law to halt the program.

The state takes the allegations seriously but so far has sided with the therapists, said Jeff Kasper, spokesman for the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. "Our standpoint is that the law hasn't been broken," he said, "but we're looking into this and making sure with the attorney general's office."

Supporters of the new program believe it will survive scrutiny, said Myra Munson, a former commissioner of Health and Social Services and now a private attorney in Juneau. "We hope the A.G. will give the right advice to the (dental) board, or that board members will take a deep breath and realize this is a fundamental public health issue," she said. "We're on the side of angels here."

The dental therapists are one element of a federal health care effort for Native Americans that is rooted in treaties and agreements dating back some 200 years, Munson said. Over time, programs have been created specifically to serve remote Alaska Native communities.

One of them, the community health-aide program, started in the 1960s. Aides are trained, certified and monitored under the auspices of the Indian Health Service. Because the program was created by Congress, because it has its own certification process and because state regulation would interfere with it, the federal program pre-empts state licensing requirements, Munson said.

The dental aide program came later, but it too is a federal program exempt from state oversight, Munson said. "We believe Mr. Towle is wrong."

Rural patients will be served well by the new program, she said. After 18 months of training, graduates must spend 400 hours working directly under a dentist, then prove their ability to a certification board.

They're not dentists, Munson said, "but the standard of care they will be judged against is the same as any dentist." And because their school work focuses on a smaller range of skills than a dentist, they get more hours of clinical training on operations such as drilling and tooth extraction, she said.

The dentists' association has no objection to dental aides performing work, so long as the work is reversible, Towle said. "Once you take that drill and cut on that tooth, you can't undo it. Once you pull that tooth, you can't put it back," he said.

That's why the state must make sure that only dentists can perform irreversible dental work, Towle said.

"Our attorneys tell us that when it comes to something as fundamental as the practice of dentistry, this is clearly the state's right to police professions," Towle said.

Dentists have expressed concern over the therapist program since the first Alaskans began their studies in New Zealand. The American Dental Association sent a delegation to rural Alaska early last year to see the situation firsthand.

It's a bleak picture, according to Paul Sherry, chief executive officer of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium. Children in rural Alaska have more than twice as many cavities than the national average. The turnover rate among dentists working in rural hubs is

high, and one in four dental positions is vacant.

"Some new approach needs to be tried here," he said. Therapists have been used successfully in Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Great Britain, Sherry said. "It just makes sense to us to give it a chance to prove up."

The Kotzebue region is eager to have its first two graduates become certified and get to work, said Paul Hansen, deputy administrator of Maniilaq Association, the regional health care provider in Northwest Alaska.

"I think they will provide great services, and I'm disappointed the Alaska Dental Society decided to take the stance they have here instead of working with us on it," Hansen said. "We've got to be working together to solve the health problems out here."

The dentists have offered help, according to Towle. The national association sought volunteers for short stints in villages or regional hubs, and it might help find dentists willing to spend longer periods under paid contracts.

The offer got a cold reception from Alaska Native health care officials, he said.

"They're moving forward with their program, while our volunteers are sitting in Georgia, Tennessee and wherever else and we're not able to bring them forward," he said.

Sherry said that approach hasn't worked well in rural Alaska. "This is a new approach that a lot of Americans are not well-informed about. We feel that as there is more understanding, they will embrace the program."

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