

Dental Aides approved by State Controversy continues as ADA reps visit Bethel

by Paul Basile

The State Attorney General's office recently issued a statement approving the use of unlicensed dental health aides in rural Alaskan communities. The Alaska Dental Society and the American Dental Association say that the aides are unqualified to perform irreversible procedures.

Representatives from the Alaska Dental Society visited Bethel last week to speak about the issue at the Chamber of Commerce meeting. Supporters of the dental aide program picketed outside Family Restaurant, where the meeting was held.

During their presentation, the ADS reps stressed that they support the program and understand its value, but oppose allowing nondentists to perform irreversible procedures such as drilling and extractions. It is on these grounds that the dentists challenged the program with the State.

In the State memorandum to The Alaska Board of Dental Examiners, Paul Lyle, Senior Assistant to the Attorney General, advised that the dental aides should be able to continue their work.

"We conclude that, so long as they are employed by Native Health clinics and treat patients authorized to receive care in those clinics, individuals certified as dental health aides by the federal Community Health Aide Certification Board do not have to comply with state dental licensure laws," Lyle wrote.

It seems that the conflict is far from over. The issue may go to court, though there has been definite indication that it will.

Jim Towle, Executive Director of the Alaska Dental Society, would not comment on what the Society's next move would be though he did suggest that they won't be giving up any time soon.

“We will continue to advocate for a single standard for all Alaskans,” said Towle in an interview.

During the presentation at Family Restaurant last Thursday, Towle stressed that it is not the intent of the Society or the ADA to end the program, but to “enhance it”.

The dentists want the aides to continue working in rural communities where there is a desperate need for improved dental care, but will not sanction the aides conducting irreversible procedures.

Towle believes that the aides would better serve patients by focusing on preventative care.

“We believe in a single standard for every citizen,” said Towle. “One uniform standard of care.”

To Towle and the Society, the care offered by the dental aides is a 2nd class service and potentially dangerous for patients.

A member of the community asked the Society reps what aides would have to do to be able to perform the irreversible procedures with the support of the Society and ADA.

They stated that the aides would have to become dentists.

“The need to go to Dental school,” said Dr. Higgins of the Alaska Dental Society. “They didn’t go to dental school. They went to 18 months of training in New Zealand.”

The dentists were subjected to sharp questioning from the audience of community members.

Proponents of the dental aide program believe that it is a creative and effective solution to the dental health issues that face rural Alaskans.

The rate of dental decay among Alaska Native children is twice the national rate. Part of the problem is the lack of dental care available in villages.

Though the Alaska Dental Society and the ADA recognize the dental epidemic occurring in rural Alaska and that the dental aides may be a part of the solution, they will not condone the aides performing irreversible procedures.

“We draw the line at drilling and pulling,” said Dr. Higgins.

A group of dental aide supporters marched down the highway protesting the Society’s opposition.

Dalarie Peters, Dental Assistant Supervisor at YKHC, was part of the picketing group.

“We’re just supporting the therapists,” she said. “They’re really good at what they do.”