

**CURRENT ISSUE**

September 2005

Alaska Dental Aide Bill Aimed At Filling Gaps - Sandra Basu

WASHINGTON-State and national dental groups agree that the state of dental care in Alaska is not up to par, but they are at odds over how to address the problem.

At a joint Senate hearing before the Committee on Indian Affairs and the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions in July, opposing sides of a provision in a Senate bill that allows dental health-aide therapists (DHATs) in Alaska to perform dental work that is typically performed by state-licensed dentists clashed over whether this was benefiting dental care in Alaska.

The Senate bill, The Indian Health Care Improvement Act Amendment of 2005, includes a provision for reauthorization that allows DHATs in a federally-funded dental program in Alaska to perform dental work, including extractions and filling procedures usually performed by licensed dentists. Additionally, a provision in the proposed bill calls for a four-year moratorium on the use of DHATs in performing irreversible procedures. The bill had not been taken up by the full Senate for consideration as of the last month.



Dr. Charles Grim, IHS director

According to the Alaska Native Tribal Consortium, a nonprofit health organization that is managed by Alaska Native tribal governments and their regional health organizations, Alaska Natives suffer rates of dental decay that are 2.5 times greater than the national rate.

IHS Director Dr. Charles Grim told Senate members at the hearing that there is a challenge providing dental care in Alaska where he said there is a shortage of dentists.

"We currently have about a 24 per cent vacancy rate of dentists nationally, IHS-wide. The last statistics that I've seen from the tribes in Alaska showed that in the outlying parts of Alaska that number is getting closer to 50 per cent," Dr. Grim said.

Dr. Mary Williard, deputy director of the Yukon Kuskokwin Health Corporation in Bethel, Alaska, that manages a health care system for the 58 federally recognized tribes in the southwest part of the state, told the Senate panel that the DHAT program is badly needed to help provide dental care in rural areas in Alaska where IHS has vacancies for dentists. She

said that for the Alaska Natives who live in the 200 villages without road access, dental services are only available when a dentist flies to the area to conduct a dental clinic and so the use of DHATs would help provide needed dental care.

"The dental therapists have been working in a number of countries and have a very good track record," she said at the hearing.

The DHATs are recruited by the Alaskan tribes and come mostly from the tribes. They are trained through a partnership with Otago University in New Zealand, a school of dentistry. After completing the two-year program, students return to their home communities to provide services. The DHATs do not fall under the authority of the Alaska State Medical or Dental Practice Acts, but are instead certified by a Board appointed by the IHS. Dr. Williard said at the hearing that five DHATs have been trained and are now in their preceptorship training with dentists in regional hospitals in Alaska, while others are currently still in training in New Zealand.

The American Dental Association (ADA), however, and other groups want the provision allowing DHATs to perform irreversible procedures to be deleted from the Indian Health Care Improvement Act because they say that DHATs are not adequately trained to do these procedures.

Dr. Robert M. Brandjord, president-elect of the ADA, told Senate members the care these dental aides provide is "second-class" and said that the DHATs are "inadequately trained and unlicensed to perform irreversible surgical procedures."

The ADA said that while it supports the use of DHATs in villages in Alaska for oral health prevention and education, it does not support their use for irreversible surgical procedures on patients.

In an interview with U.S. MEDICINE last month, Dr. Brandjord said that ADA would like to see the IHS Dental Corps receive more money and be better staffed. He also said that having more dental assistants and more dental chairs per dentist would make the current dental system for Alaska Natives more efficient.

He said he does not feel that DHATs are the answer in dealing with the extent of dental disease in the area. The ADA said that DHATs are only trained for two years after graduating from high school, while dentists are typically trained for four years after completing college undergraduate work.

"The extent of the dental disease, which is causing the pain, is something that someone with greater depth and breadth of knowledge is needed for to treat," Dr. Brandjord said.

While the DHATs do not receive the same level of training as dentists, supporters of the use of DHATs say that they must be recertified biannually and will have as many hours of educational clinical experience in the procedures they will perform as most dentists will receive during their educational program.

Supporters of the DHAT program also say that they fill the gap for the need of dental care and provide an alternative to the current situation. American Dental Hygienists Association President Katie L. Dawson said in an interview last month that the use of DHATs is a better

alternative to not having dentists.

"It's like being between a rock and a hard place. Do you accept the lesser level of education, when there is no one else available, or do you stick to your highest level of education and then no one gets service? That's the situation in Alaska," she said. "If I had a child who was in pain and I had been given the choice of, the next dentist will be in town next summer or you can have this dental therapist provide treatment for this particular situation [right now], I think if I had to make that choice, or any parent had to make that choice, they'd say let's see the therapist," she said.

Finding A Solution

One point of contention is whether bringing outside dentists into Alaska would help alleviate the dental care problem. Dr. Brandjord told Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R., Alaska) at the hearing that ADA member dentists have been interested in performing volunteer stints in Alaska to help fill in gaps and that getting volunteer dentists is one of the efforts that should be pursued.

Sen. Murkowski, who supports the DHAT program, said at the hearing that attracting dentists to come to Alaska during the winter months is not easy and that dentists generally can only stay for the short term.

Sen. Murkowski asked Dr. Grim, who is a dentist, what his opinion is on the DHAT program.

Dr. Grim told Sen. Murkowski that he visited Alaska last summer and felt that the DHAT program had "merits." Since then, he said that additional concerns about the program have been raised and that IHS is working with organizations that have concerns about the program to find solutions to the dental care dilemma. He acknowledged that a long-term concerted effort to address the dental needs of Alaska will need to be pursued.

"We need to continue to try to be very aggressive in recruiting Alaska Natives that want to get into dental school. I encourage them to do that in a mentor scholarship program and hopefully have them go back home and serve their obligations in their communities and then continue to stay with their tribal programs. I think it's going to be a long-term effort," Dr. Grim said.

[Back to the article list](#)

Other Articles from September 2005:

- [Returnees With PTSD At Risk Of Suicide In Cases - Stephen Spotswood](#)
- [Rehab Center For War Wounded Being Built - Sandra Basu](#)
- [VA Review Of PTSD Cases Questioned - Stephen Spotswood](#)
- [Alaska Dental Aide Bill Aimed At Filling Gaps - Sandra Basu](#)
- [New National Medical Chief Will Lead Homeland Bioterrorism Defense Expert - Matt Pueschel](#)

- [**Patient Safety Act Establishes Voluntary Error Reporting Process - Daisy Spangler**](#)
- [**Experimental Avian Flu Vaccine Successful, Problems Remain - Stephen Spotswood**](#)
- [**Congress Fixes VA FY '05 Budget After Shortfall; Turns Eye To FY '06 - Stephen Spotswood**](#)
- [**IHS Doc Strives For Healthy Hearts Among AI/AN - Sandra Basu**](#)
- [**Technology Profile -**](#)
- [**U.S. Forces Aid Polio Effort In Africa - Sandra Basu**](#)
- [**Sen. Frist Alters View On Stem Cell Policy - Stephen Spotswood**](#)
- [**CDC Reports Increase In Childhood Vaccinations -**](#)

All materials copyright 2000-2005, U.S. Medicine, Inc.

[HOME](#)