

03/17/21

Dear Chair Prusak and members of the House Committee on Health Care,

I am excited to hear that you are considering adding dental therapists into your dental care teams. I hope you decide to do it.

I am a general dentist from Indiana who first came to work in rural Alaska in 2008. At that time, the program here was in its infancy and we were just starting to utilize dental therapists. I remember travelling out to the smaller communities in our region and being overwhelmed by the number of patients who would come in to see us for toothaches. Almost every child had to have their four front top teeth extracted. We would pull out all 4 first permanent molars on 6 year-old children. Nearly every adult that would come in would need teeth taken out. It was a scramble on those trips to make sure you saw everyone who was in pain. I did that for 3 years as the dental therapy program was slowly expanding in the background. I left Alaska in 2011 and worked in a private practice in rural Indiana until 2014.

I returned to rural Alaska in 2014 specifically to work with dental therapists and have been here ever since. The change that I have personally seen in the oral health of the patients we serve is phenomenal. We now have a robust dental therapy program and when a dentist travels out to one of our smaller communities that receives care from a dental therapist, instead of working from lists of people in pain, they start by working off of lists of people who have treatment that is out of scope of what a dental therapist can provide. There are usually a few toothaches that still come in, but the people we see have the opportunity now to get preventive and restorative care on a more regular basis due to the dental therapists who are living and working in the smaller communities.

The severity of the need and lack of access is worse in Alaska, but the same problems were also very present in Indiana. I saw children there who would have to travel several hours and wait several months to be seen by a provider willing to accept Medicaid. I'd have loved to have had dental therapists in Indiana.

The scope that a dental therapist has is smaller than that of a dentist. This works because the communities that they are caring for need access to things like exams, prevention services, fillings and extractions. These are all things that a dental therapist can provide. I have worked now with 20+ dentists and 15+ dental therapists over the course of my career, and I can honestly say that within the scope that dental therapists are trained to practice in, they are providing care that is equal in quality to that of a dentist. We are not offering our patients a lower quality of care. Dental therapists are not independent providers, and if there is ever anything they have a question about or are not comfortable with, they consult with their supervising dentist. If there is ever anything a dentist is not comfortable with a dental therapist doing, they can easily limit the scope of that particular dental therapist via their standing orders (practice agreement).

The Commission on Dental Accreditation, which accredits all American dental schools, has created accreditation standards for the profession and last year accredited the dental therapy training program here in Alaska. I have been involved in the process of recruiting candidates, supporting them through school and transitioning them from graduates of the Alaska training program to certified dental providers providing care for patients under general supervision. We have been successful in recruiting candidates from the communities who need the care and getting them back out to those communities to work when they are fully trained. It is awesome to be a part of! Not only are we getting patients care, but we are creating culturally competent care and providing role models and opportunities for people from underserved populations to be able to become a part of the solution.

I'd be happy to answer any questions or share my experiences with anyone who is interested. Feel free to contact me if I can be of assistance to the committee.

Judith Burks, DDS