The Dental Hygienist Workforce

The number of licensed dental hygiene providers in Montana has continued to grow, and now exceeds the number of licensed dentists. With the State’s investment in a new dental hygiene education clinic currently under construction in Great Falls, even more graduates will be entering the workforce.

In 2014 the National Governors Association recognized the untapped dental hygiene workforce in their white paper entitled The Role Of Dental Hygienists In Providing Access to Oral Health Care stating

“To increase access to basic oral health, some states have explored policies that would permit and even encourage dental hygienists to practice outside dentists’ offices.”

Schools. Licensed dental hygienists are already providing care in high-need schools, under general supervision of a dentist. Unfortunately, this supervision inhibits dental hygienists from providing preventive services in additional rural areas because they are unable to find a dentist willing to supervise services in these alternate settings.

Additionally, dental hygienists seeking to add schools to the existing Rules have faced resistance by organized dentists. Adding schools to the list of public health facilities in MAC 37-4-405 will create jobs, remove burden and improve access to more rural areas of Montana. Getting Montana children the dental care they need.

Access to Dental Care Out There. Many communities in Montana are unable to support a full-time dentist. Creating access points in non-dental settings supports health by improving medical-dental integration - making the mouth part of health care. In the current system of care delivery, the mouth is a separate, siloed component of health.

Population per Dentists within a 15-Minute Travel Time
Reference: American Dental Association Health Policy Institute 2015 data, published 2017

Improving oral health services in schools and medical settings will drive consumer use of dental care and reduce barriers. Research shows that lack of insurance coverage, cost, lack of knowledge and fear are significant factors in accessing dental care in the current delivery system. Bringing access to settings already being used by Montana citizens increases the visibility of the mouths impact on health.
What Services Are Dental Hygienists Educated to Provide?

Dental hygienists have a 3.5 to 4 year undergraduate education, although advanced degrees are available. To become licensed in Montana a dental hygienist must graduate from an accredited program, take a national written exam, take a regional clinical exam, have current CPR certification, take continuing education credits every year (12 to 15 hours depending on work setting) AND pass an exam regarding state practice laws. Additional exams are required to administer local anesthesia, but this is only allowed in a dental practice.

Services Dental Hygienists Can Provide
- Dental prophylaxis (cleanings) and assessments
- Application of preventive dental agents (fluoride, mouth rinses, topical agents)
- Exposure of x-rays
- Patient education
- Care navigation

Important Note: The scope of services provided by dental hygienists would not change. The legislative changes would simply change the settings dental hygienists are allowed to perform services. Adding hospitals and medical settings integrates dental services into the healthcare system. Creating quality job opportunities for rural areas of the State.

There is a national trend toward expanded settings for dental hygiene providers. Currently, 10 states allow direct access in schools by dental hygienists.

The map below shows the dental shortage areas in Montana, nearly every county. It also shows the access points that could be created if hospital and medical settings were included (red crosses).