

Testimony of Leon A. Assael, DMD
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I am writing to express my strong support for the effort Maine to enact a state law to improve the oral health of its citizens. I am the Dean of the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry, where we are training Minnesota's dental therapists. Our dental therapy graduates are already in practice providing needed dental care to underserved patients and communities in Minnesota. I am proud of our graduates and am confident that their patients are well-served and receive the highest quality of dental care in a variety of dental practices in our state.

I understand the Maine law will authorize treatment of patients suffering from dental caries to save teeth subjected to decay by well trained and supervised individuals similar to the dental therapists who have been so successful since their launch in Minnesota five years ago. I understand that your education model will include a means for advanced training in the treatment of tooth decay with the ability to as a part of the dental team perform restorative procedures under the supervision of a dentist.

I know that there are questions about the appropriateness of this program from some in the dental community. Critics question the experimental concept of this program or that the quality services might be inferior. I am writing to assure you that these arguments are not supported by facts, research, or our experiences of Minnesota, Alaska and over 50 countries where mid-level oral health practitioners are practicing today. Our Minnesota dental therapists are well-trained, fully understand the limited but essential scope of services they are authorized to provide, and provide high quality dental services under the supervision of a dentist. Indeed, at the University of Minnesota they are educated in exactly the same courses that educated dentists with regard to these services. Their devotion to a limited area of practice makes them very effective in that specific area. As pioneers of this field in America, they are particularly devoted to their patients and to the importance of their work.

I firmly believe that before long dental therapists will be well-accepted members of the dental team and will be embraced by dentists, the whole health care team and patients. Our dental health care system must change to address the ravages of untreated disease. Dental caries remains the number one untreated disease in children and destroys an essential organ system, the masticatory system in adults. As in other parts of our health care system, our workforce must continue to evolve to embrace the concept of teams, with each team member working at the level consistent with their education and training. It does not make sense for a dentist, with extensive and expensive training, to perform routine procedures that could be done as well-- and less expensively -- by a mid-level practitioner integrated into the oral health care team. The great success of dental hygiene has proved this for the public and the profession, but that success has been limited to just some of the dental diseases. Your proposal will now address the greatest unmet oral health care need, the treatment of dental caries.

Change is hard and will be resisted by some, but I urge you to stand for our patients and your constituents. I encourage you to support this effort in your state. Dental therapists will reduce costs of dental care and improve access for underserved communities. Our University of Minnesota dental therapy graduates are living proof of that achievement.