

I write to shed some light on the issue of “mid-level dental providers” covered in the News & Observer on February 9. The quotation that “[w]e have got to get something done in this state,” while correct, is neither a new idea nor a position that has escaped the notice of the legislature or the North Carolina Dental Society.

How to address the dental needs of our underserved poor and rural populations is a subject of paramount importance to our organization and has been the subject of recent major legislation by the General Assembly. The legislature established a new dental school at East Carolina University dedicated to graduating dentists trained to practice in underserved areas of our state and also expanded the facilities and class size at UNC to increase the supply of dentists admitted to practice in North Carolina. We have also made it easier for dentists from other states to move to North Carolina to practice.

Despite what other states have attempted, the N.C. Dental Society’s concern for the public welfare in North Carolina requires that the poor and rural citizens of the State be provided high quality dental care and not be subject to practices that may compromise their health.

That dangerous oral problems can lead to more serious disease and threaten overall health is not in question. The statement that mid-level providers could perform “uncomplicated extractions and fillings currently performed only by dentists,” is dangerous and short-sighted since even the most experienced dentist, with 4-6 years of additional training after college, can encounter complications in a seemingly ordinary extraction. A routine appointment for a filling may lead a trained dentist to detect early oral cancer, an abnormality likely to be missed by an untrained eye.

While it may seem expedient to create new dental provider classifications, stop-gap solutions that rely on under-educated practitioners are not the answer. The new and expanded dentist education programs in North Carolina are actively, responsibly, and deliberately addressing the access to care problem and the N.C. Dental Society encourages a continuing discussion on the matter. Let’s place our emphasis on patient safety and not sacrifice quality of care for a short-term fix.

*Sincerely,
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President
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