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**Section:** Local

**Page:** 1C

## **Dentists, hygienists battle over control in Sacramento**

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Hygienists seek autonomy to treat patients

By Jake Henshaw

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SACRAMENTO - Dentists and hygienists are battling in the Capitol over legislation intended to increase dental cleanings and other preventive care for children, senior citizens and disabled Californians who get little or no care now.

At issue is whether a special category of dental hygienists can provide such care safely to isolated and often low-income groups without a prescription from a dentist.

The bill, Assembly Bill 1334 by Assemblyman Simon Salinas, D-Salinas, would also allow these hygienists to work in federally-designated areas with inadequate dental services, including large parts of Tulare County.

It would drop the current prescription mandate but still require hygienists to have a contract with a dentist for referrals and emergency care.

"This allows [specially-trained hygienists] to do what they are trained to do and that is go out and see the folks in the under-served communities," Salinas said.

But Assemblywoman Bonnie Garcia, R-Cathedral City, who voted against the bill when it passed the Assembly on a largely party line vote, said there are better ways to meet these needs, such as the Smile Factory, a mobile dental unit supervised by dentists and provided by the Desert Health Care Foundation for elementary school students.

"I think there are other ways to deliver care without lowering the bar," Garcia said.

Susan McLearn of Visalia, a hygienist in this special category, argued there's no danger without prescriptions, only delay now in getting them.

She cited mixed experiences getting prescriptions for her patients, sometimes obtaining them fairly easily but other times waiting months.

"It's very unfair to the patient," McLearn said.

Dr. Harry Schneider, a dentist who practices in Rancho Mirage, said hygienists don't have the training to evaluate the medical condition of a patient, which could require, for example, antibiotics before dental cleaning.

"That is what I am concerned with, patient safety," Schneider said. "The doctor ensures the patient is going to be safe."

McLearn said she works at Kaweah Delta Hospital with quadriplegic and other patients with serious health problems, as well in a nursing home and with homebound patients.

"It's just so important for them to feel like human beings," McLearn said.

AB 1334 is the latest step in the development of more independent hygienists that began with a 16-year pilot program allowing a handful of them to serve thousands of needy Californians without prescriptions.

Issue at a glance

Issue: How to provide dental services to under-served groups such as the homebound, children and residents of areas with few dentists.

Proposed solution: Assembly Bill 1334 would revise existing law so that specially-trained dental hygienists can clean teeth and perform other preventive care without the prescription now required.

Arguments in favor: Hygienists argue the prescription mandate is a barrier to care and they can provide safe care more efficiently without them.

Arguments against: Dentists counter that hygienists aren't adequately trained to evaluate patients alone, and there isn't good evidence that the prescription requirement is an obstacle.

Need:

- 28 percent of, or 750,000, California elementary school students have untreated tooth decay

- 4 percent, or 138,000, need urgent care because of pain or infection.

Dental Health Foundation, a foundation-supported research and technical support organization based in Oakland.

Politics

- The Dental Board of California, which regulates the industry, has adopted three positions on the bill - oppose, support, oppose. The last position was approved at a meeting where only dentists were present; the public members and hygienist were absent. Some board members changed during this time.

- Charges of bad faith between dentists and hygienists over efforts to provide prescriptions, with each saying the other isn't taking necessary steps to ensure under-served patients' needs are met.