

The Story of Dental Therapy

Many years ago, when the profession of Dental Hygiene was born in the United States, Dental Therapy was being born in New Zealand. Recently some states have legalized Dental Therapy (and New Zealand has adopted Dental Hygiene!)

History

When Dental Therapy was started in Australia and New Zealand, the therapists worked in schools on children. They could meet most of the dental needs of children. The services were supported by the government. The Therapists were paid a salary not based on procedures. Adults were cared for in private dental practices paying for procedures much like in our country. The education was two years long. The therapists were “supervised” by a dentist who was available for consultation and performed chart audits on an annual basis. The dentist worked in Wellington, the Capitol of New Zealand. Interesting Fact: Currently there are more countries on the planet that have Dental Therapists than have Dental Hygienists.

Both Australia and New Zealand have combined the education for Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy into a Bachelor of Oral Health degree.

Today

The reason Dental Therapy is being considered in many states in our country is that many people do not have access to dental care. There are currently 12 states who authorize dental therapists. And Arizona is one of them! So what is a dental therapist? A dental therapist is a professional who provides basic dental care. As with many things, each state has its own laws including its definition, education requirements, and scope of practice. Some, like Arizona, require the applicant to be a dental hygienist. Other states do not require that. Minnesota has both a dental therapist and an advanced dental therapist. Each with its own requirements and scope of practice. For the rest of this article, I will focus on the Arizona model. There is a supervision requirement, either direct or by collaborative practice agreement. The intent of the legislation is that the dental therapist will work with patients who currently do not have access to care.

According to Arizona State Law, In addition to the scope of practice of a dental hygienist, the dental therapist can

- Perform simple extraction of erupted primary teeth.
- Perform nonsurgical extractions of periodontally diseased permanent teeth that exhibit plus three or grade three mobility and that are not impacted, fractured, unerupted or in need of sectioning for removal.
- Perform emergency palliative treatments of dental pain that is related to care or a service described in this section.
- Prepare and place direct restorations in primary and permanent teeth.
- Fabricate and place single-tooth temporary crowns.
- Prepare and place preformed crowns on primary teeth.
- Perform indirect and direct pulp capping on permanent teeth.
- Perform indirect pulp capping on primary teeth.
- Perform suturing and suture removal.
- Provide minor adjustments and repairs on removable prostheses.
- Place and remove space maintainers.

- Perform all functions of a dental assistant and expanded function dental assistant.
- Perform other related services and functions that are authorized by the supervising dentist within the dental therapist's scope of practice and for which the dental therapist is trained.
- Provide referrals.
- Perform any other duties of a dental therapist that are authorized by the board by rule.

A dental therapist may not:

- Dispense or administer a narcotic drug.
- Independently bill for services to any individual or third-party payor.

The Road Blocks

At present, there is no educational program for dental therapy in Arizona. Educational programs are available in Minnesota. One is at the University of Minnesota and the other is Metropolitan State University. There are accreditation standards written by the Commission on Dental Accreditation. And the Pew Foundation has developed a curriculum available for Community Colleges to use and/or modify.

Because our health care system is more privately run and dental therapy is not well known in the United States, it will take a lot of education for schools to implement a curriculum and for jobs to be available.

The Opportunity

Because a dental therapist in Arizona must be a dental hygienist first, it provides an opportunity for growth and change. Many hygienists are lifelong learners and enjoy learning new skills. Becoming a dental therapist would satisfy those needs and allow you to provide more care to those who need it.