

Sent to ISDS Members on October 20, 2021



Dear Member,

You may have seen an article published in both Chicago newspapers titled “[Hygienists Brace for Pitched Battles with Dentists in Fights Over Practice Laws.](#)” It was written by a freelance reporter from the [Kaiser Family Foundation.](#)

As noted in the article, ISDS did not support, for patient safety reasons, changes proposed in the 2021 session that would have expanded provisions allowing hygienists (*certified as Public Health Dental Hygienists*) to treat patients in prisons, nursing homes and mobile dental vans without the dentist first conducting a dental exam. Listed below is a summary of our position on these issues as well as background on what is currently allowed in these settings.

We want to inform you about this, in the event you were to receive questions from your local media or legislators, who may be confused. The article did not depict an accurate picture of the situation as it exists.

ISDS has long contended that all patients deserve the same level of care. A doctor, who is trained to both diagnose and provide the safest and highest quality of care, should provide this care. Any care delegated to a

hygienist or assistant should be limited and supervised by the dentist.

What is a Public Health Dental Hygienist? A public health dental hygienist is a hygienist who has a clinical level of education and training received mostly at two-year community college programs in Illinois. This is the standard level of clinical education required to be licensed in the state and has changed very little over the years. Five years ago, ISDS, working with members of the General Assembly, proposed this new designation (Public Health Dental Hygienist) in order to allow a dental hygienist with additional CE training and in a close relationship with a supervising dentist, to see Medicaid and low-income patients prior to a comprehensive exam by a dentist. The training requirements passed for this new expansion, were an additional 42 clock hours. This was not a new degree or formal education, but only a limited expansion on clinical subject areas of knowledge needed so a hygienist might be aware of, and be able to recognize more complicated oral conditions, when treating a patient prior to a full examination.

The intent of this new expansion was to allow a dental hygienist who was employed in a public health setting, such as a County Clinic or a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), the ability to provide standard and basic cleaning services in the event the dentist was unavailable on that particular day and a patient needed routine care. In addition, a Public Health Dental Hygienist was required to

have a formal written agreement and have it reviewed annually.

In 2015, when this passed into law, a verbal agreement was made between ISDS and the Illinois Dental Hygienists' Association that no other expansions would be proposed until enough time had passed and data could be compiled to show if this program was effective, or not, in providing additional care to the underserved. The training required for this new expansion was finally developed in 2020. It took five years for the dental hygienists to develop and implement a very simple training program to be able to demonstrate their commitment to this effort to increase access to care. It is our conclusion that, due to the fact that there was no real interest in developing a training program until just prior to asking for an expansion of scope in 2021, it appears there was no real interest in truly providing access to care to needy patients. Rather, it appears the goal is to separate from a dentist's supervision and move toward an independent practice model.

Does the ISDS oppose dental hygienists providing care to patients in long term care facilities or nursing homes? No.

The article failed to mention a very important provision in the Illinois Dental Practice Act, 225 ILCS Section 18(d) provides that:

If a patient of record is unable to travel to a dental office because of illness, infirmity, or imprisonment, a dental

*hygienist may perform, under the general supervision of a dentist, those procedures found in items (i) through (iv) of subsection (a) of this Section, (cleanings) provided the patient is located in a **(long-term care facility)** licensed by the State of Illinois, a mental health or developmental disability facility, **or a State or federal prison**. The dentist shall personally examine and diagnose the patient and determine which services are necessary to be performed, which shall be contained in an order to the hygienist and a notation in the patient's record. Such order must be implemented within 120 days of its issuance, and an updated medical history and observation of oral conditions must be performed by the hygienist immediately prior to beginning the procedures to ensure that the patient's health has not changed in any manner to warrant a reexamination by the dentist.*

This is an important safety provision because residents of LTC facilities and nursing home are the most vulnerable patients with the most compromised medical conditions. Many are taking multiple medications that place the patient in a very high-risk category. The standard of care for this population is to coordinate care between the patient's physician and the dentist to ensure that the patient does not have a life-threatening adverse reaction to treatment.

Unfortunately, the article did not address the fact that dental hygienists can already, under the current law, cited above, provide the type of care depicted as being opposed by the ISDS.

Finally, ISDS has consistently fought for increases in access to care for the underserved. The ISDS Foundation provides \$1 million in free dental care to 2,000 patients over a two day span every other year. ISDS, using its political influence, lobbies for and has secured passage of expansion of Illinois' Medicaid program to cover preventative services for all adults. Just this year, ISDS secured a \$10 million increase in Medicaid rates that will help dentists participate in the program and provide care to children and adults in the Medicaid program.

To conclude, Dentists in Illinois are committed to providing the highest level of care to patients. ISDS will continue to be a strong and effective voice for our members. We will remain the recognized leader and advocate for the oral health of all Illinois citizens.

