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Toney: Create more educational opportunities for dental therapists

Jamie Toney The Detroit News

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The dental field has a well-known issue with diversity.

According to the American Dental Association, only 3.6% of dentists in Michigan are Black, and 2.3% are Hispanic, despite the fact that 14.1% of residents are Black and 5.7% are Hispanic or Latino.

Unfortunately, this disparity also impacts access to care. Black adults in Michigan are 16% less likely than White adults to have received dental care in the past year, and Black children are 25% more likely to have untreated tooth decay compared to their White peers.

My eyes opened to the oral health disparities while participating in a dental co-op program while attending Denby High School in Detroit. I've also served as a dental practice administrator for a federally qualified health center (FQHC).

I saw firsthand the dedication of dental providers and support staff in delivering exceptional care, but I also saw patients with non-emergency needs having to wait for months due to the demand which exceeded the capacity of available dental providers.

In 2023, with the goal of improving the quality of life for my family and others, I decided to pursue my degree in dental therapy. Unfortunately, that required moving all the way across the country.

It shouldn't be that hard. Michigan has a golden opportunity to support people like me and create a dental workforce that looks more like the people it cares for. But right now, we're falling short of the mark. Here's why.

In 2018, then-Gov. Rick Snyder signed legislation that authorized dental therapy in Michigan, and the regulations were finalized in 2021. Dental therapists are trained to provide some of the most common dental procedures, including exams, cleanings, filling cavities and simple extractions.

Although they receive a good salary, they're less expensive to hire than dentists and can be trained at far less time and cost. This makes education more accessible to people from low-income communities and first-generation or nontraditional students.

Dental therapists are specially trained to provide access in traditionally underserved communities. They also increase access to dental care, decrease costs, build a culturally competent workforce, and provide necessary dental oral health education to vulnerable populations. Ultimately, the integration of them into the dental care team can lead to improved health care outcomes and better utilization of resources.

In Michigan, more than 1.5 million residents live within a federally designated dental shortage area. So, if the need is there, why are there currently no dental therapists working in the state? As of today, no colleges in Michigan offer a path to a degree in dental therapy.

I am deeply appreciative of the educational opportunity I have been granted at Skagit Valley College, as well as the scholarship provided by the Michigan Primary Care Association. This organization has been tirelessly working to bring dental therapy to Michigan. However, in order to cultivate a diverse and strong dental workforce in our state, it is imperative that we expand our educational programs.

While Ferris State University has taken the first step in developing a program, it is crucial that we establish various program models in different locations to ensure accessibility for all.

I'm scheduled to graduate in 2025. Then, I dream of returning to Detroit and finding employment as a dental therapist. Hopefully, future dental therapists will be able to pursue their dreams right here in Michigan.

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