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Dental Debate

Independent Dental Hygienists Defend the Right to Continue Pilot Program

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SACRAMENTO — Laurelyn Borst of San Francisco has a theory about why the dental profession so vehemently opposes the professional independence of dental hygienists.

"Most hygienists are female, and most dentists are male," she said. "It's like daddy's little girl is leaving the nest and getting her own tree."

After decades of professional harmony, hygienists and the California Dental Association wound up in court over a pilot program permitting 15 California hygienists, including Borst, to establish independent practices. The hygienists make home and convalescent hospital visits and are trying to show that costs can be cut and care provided to individuals who would not otherwise receive it.

Last week a Sacramento Superior Court judge refused to halt the experiment.

Deputy Attorney General Diana Woodward Hagle, who defended the program for the state, said the ruling "is a complete vindication" of the act, which was passed by the Legislature in 1972 to encourage health care innovations.

"The CDA expresses concern about patient safety," Hagle said, "but they did not sustain that argument in court."

Sacramento Superior Court Judge Rothwell

Mason said he was "underwhelmed" by the CDA's arguments and disagreed with the association's claims that the study endangered patient health or violated state procedures.

Mason said such projects are clearly sanctioned under state law. "The experiment should be allowed to continue," he said.

Last February, the California Dental Association (CDA) filed suit in Sacramento Superior Court against the state Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, asking for an injunction to halt the program and for public hearings to study it. The association claimed dental hygienists should not be allowed to practice unsupervised by a dentist.

"Not all dentists agree with the profession's position," Borst said. "When this phase of resistance is over, we will open a new era of dentistry, which ultimately will benefit the consumer."

But at the moment, dentists are irate about the ruling.

"Our concern is for patients who may be fooled into thinking that by visiting an unsupervised hygienist they are receiving professional dental care," said California Dental Association executive director Dale F. Redig, a dentist. "Being treated in a research program is not the same as being treated by a licensed dentist."

Paul Lombardo, general counsel for the den-

tal association, said a decision will be made later about an appeal. He expressed surprise — "considering the complexities of the case" — that Mason ruled from the bench.

Lombardo said the experimental program originally was proposed in 1981. The dental association was notified of the proposal. The dental association opposed the original proposal, which was subsequently expanded, according to Lombardo. He said the association should have been notified of the expansion and public hearings held.

But Margaret Gerould, a deputy director with the state health planning and development office, said the Health Manpower Pilot Project Act does not require further notification beyond the 1981 advisory.

The program was put into effect in 1986. In February 1987, the 15 hygienists began to see patients, and the dental association filed its lawsuit. Since the second quarter of 1987, the hygienists have seen 700 patients, according to Gerould.

The program is funded through the state by a dental hygienists foundation.

Gerould, and hygienists in the program weren't aware there was anything secretive about the state-sanctioned and funded program, which is monitored by the state health planning and development office under the manpower pilot project act.

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Emphasizing that he was not quoting from his ruling while a written transcript is prepared, the judge said the CDA "did not convince me" that the program was being operated improperly or was contrary to the legislation.

CDA's Redig insisted in a prepared statement that "the ruling is not a complete loss."

"Thanks to the court hearings and news coverage," he said, "this experimental program is now out in the open."

The program is the first of its kind in the nation, according to the California Hygienists' Association.

The project is designed to measure "the safety and economic viability" of independent practice by hygienists. Administered by California State University in Northridge, it includes academic training, practice sessions and independent practice.

The 15 registered hygienists participating in

the project throughout the state operate independent clinics and make house calls to patients in nursing homes, retirement centers and board-and-care facilities for the elderly.

Borst says she and other hygienists are providing much-needed services to persons who would not otherwise receive preventive dental care, and the effort is no move to take business away from dentists.

"We are serving a segment of the population that is underserved and needs far more service," said Borst, a practicing hygienist for 21 years and former president of the San Francisco component of the dental hygienists' association.

She said the project should be viewed as an adjunct to — not a replacement for — care by a dentist. Ultimately, she said the project will help provide the research basis for legislation permitting independent practice by hygienists.

"We [hope] to get the data together to show people that we don't hurt them, that we are a

portal of entry, that care by a hygienist is less expensive," she said.

Borst and other hygienists often feel that they are treated like handmaidens to dentists — expendable and cheap.

"We often have no benefits," she said. "We're almost treated like we're dispensable. Of course, it's the consumer who gets it in the end."

She and other hygienists insist the issue is one of power and money. Dentists are facing a crisis in patient care as preventive dentistry reduces the need for expensive procedures performed by dentists.

"They're full of scare tactics," lobbyist Aaron Read, who represents the hygienists, says of the CDA. "We know the real argument is the wallet. They [dentists] are scared out of their wits about the possible loss of the dollar."

Dexter Varnum, media relations manager for the dental association, insists the matter is "not

at all a pocketbook issue," that in fact "many dental hygiene programs [in dentists' offices] don't make any money. From the dentist's point of view, the hygienist practicing in the office is a loss, but a necessity. If it were purely a money issue, we would be happy to have them practice independently."

He says the independent practice of hygienists is simply "not in the best interest of the public."

"The hygienists do what they do very well, but they can't diagnose disease, interpret x-rays, diagnose oral cancer," he said. "They can't even fill cavities. If they want to become dentists, they should go to dental school."

Read said "countless surveys" by the hygienists' association show that hygienists are not paid benefits because they are classified as parttime workers and generally work in an individual dentist's office two days a week. "I'm not going to call it a conspiracy on the part of den-

tists," he added, "but it sure looks like one."

"Typically they [hygienists] don't get benefits," Read said. "They get paid by the day and if they're sick, they're out of work. Many are single mothers with children to care for. We think that [lack of benefits] is an unfortunate employment practice."

Of the purported lack of adequate dental care for those confined to nursing homes, Varnum said: "The majority of people in nursing homes unfortunately don't have their teeth. They have dentures."

And, he said, many such persons are in precarious health and should not have their remaining teeth attended to without professional supervision by a dentist.

"They are medically compromised," he said of many nursing home patients, "and simply the act of cleaning teeth can be dangerous."