

Date: June 15th 2005

TO: Alaska Dental Society

FROM: Alaska State Dental Hygiene Association

RE: Oral Health Access in Alaska

The Alaska State Dental Hygiene Association (ASDHA) is committed to improving the oral health of all Alaskans, including Alaska Natives. ASDHA seeks to partner with the Alaska Dental Society (ADS) in order to improve access to oral health care services.

Dental hygienists and dentists must work together to address the access to care crisis in our State. Alaska Natives in particular suffer from tremendous unmet oral health needs. Given the oral health access crisis among Alaska Natives, tribal leaders and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have supported the use of dental health aide therapists to perform irreversible dental procedures through the Alaska Community Health Aide Program. ASDHA recognizes that ADS is concerned about the provision of irreversible dental procedures by dental health aide therapists in Alaska. ASDHA further recognizes that the dental health aide program can not currently meet all the oral health needs of the Alaska natives and that further work is needed.

ASDHA supports the concept of the Dental Health Aide program and the Dental Health Therapist but not as currently outlined in Indian Health Service Documents. ASDHA feels strongly that the level of education must be sufficient in order for the Dental Health Aides/ Therapists to provide the services they are performing. It is difficult for us to measure the sufficiency of the therapists' education, however it seems unlikely that all the irreversible procedures being performed can be learned in a two year curriculum. Accordingly, we believe the state should have regulations or licensing for clinicians who perform these types of services in Alaska, whether the services are performed on Alaska Natives or others in Alaska. ASDHA also believes that *independent* competency evaluation by dental professionals should be required for clinicians prior to services being performed.

ASDHA recognizes the government status of the tribes and the tribes' obligation and authority to implement programs that meet the needs of Alaska Natives. That being said, ASDHA wants to work towards possible solutions to help meet the needs of Alaska and all its underserved populations. We believe one alternative is the Advanced Dental Hygiene Practitioner (ADHP) concept being advanced by the American Dental Hygienists' Association. By virtue of being educated at a master's degree level, being licensed, and having completed a comprehensive curriculum, the ADHP will be well-prepared to help address crucial access to care needs.

Additionally, to more promptly address the current access problems in the state, ASDHA would like to move forward with ADS in developing expanded functions with educational parameters and state regulations to expand the scope of services for hygienists. Allowing restorative functions (such as the Washington model), general supervision for local anesthesia, and limited access permits could help resolve some of the access problems in the state.

We look forward to working together to improve access to care.