

Charleston Gazette (West Virginia)

March 10, 2008, Monday

'Great day for oral health'; Hygienists get OK for working alone

Eric Eyre ericeyre@wvgazette.com

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. P1D

For the first time, West Virginia dental hygienists will be allowed to practice in schools, nursing homes, hospitals and health clinics without a dentist standing over their shoulder.

State lawmakers unanimously approved a bill last week that loosened West Virginia's dental-practice act - one of the nation's most restrictive. The legislation was sent to Gov. Joe Manchin for his signature.

The bill gives hygienists the freedom to polish teeth, scrape gums, take X-rays and give fluoride treatments on their own without a dentist being present.

"It's a quantum leap for West Virginia," said Richard Stevens, executive director of the West Virginia Dental Association. "We're opening it up for hygienists to provide more services to patients. We're expanding and improving access."

West Virginia will become one of about 30 states that allow hygienists to practice outside a dentist's office, Stevens said.

The state Board of Dental Examiners will write the specific rules to implement the changes.

In the past, dental offices had to shut down when a dentist wasn't in the building.

Hygienists also couldn't even go to schools and nursing homes to talk about the importance of good oral hygiene unless accompanied by a dentist.

West Virginia's oral health ranks among the worst in the nation, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The state has the highest percentage of older adults who have lost all their teeth because of disease and decay. Only three states have a lower percentage of people who visit the dentist at least once a year.

Dentists and hygienists believe the changes to the dental-practice act will help improve the dismal state of dental health in West Virginia.

"It's a great day for oral health," said Gina Sharps, a dental hygienist and assistant director of West Virginia's Childhood Oral Health Project. "We're kind of playing catch-up. This will propel organized dentistry forward in terms of access to care and the provision of services."

About 770 hygienists practice in West Virginia.

To contact staff writer **Eric Eyre**, use e-mail or call 348-4869.