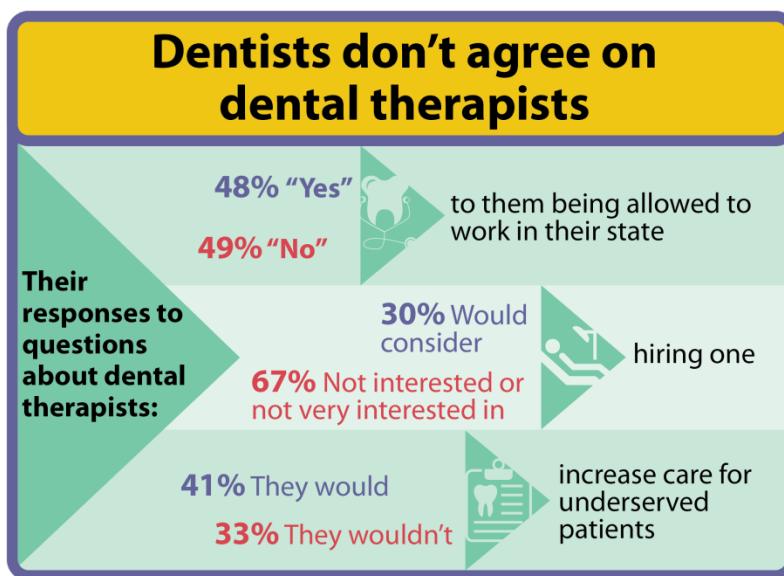


Quick Poll Results: Dentists Disagree on Role of Dental Therapists

Dentists and hygienists who responded to our September's Quick Poll are split almost 50-50 on whether dentists in their state should have the option to hire a dental therapist, a relatively new group of dental professionals authorized in very few states. With 504 votes cast, 249 (49 percent) respondents opposed and 244 (48 percent) supported dental therapists working in their states. (About 2 percent of poll respondents didn't answer the question.)

Dental therapists are midlevel providers trained to deliver preventive and routine restorative treatment, including preparing and restoring primary and permanent teeth and extracting teeth (non-surgically). Working under the supervision of dentists, they practice in Minnesota, have been authorized in Maine and Vermont, and serve the Native Alaskan population as well as three tribes in Washington and Oregon. About a dozen state legislatures are considering authorizing dental therapists as a way to expand access to care for low income and otherwise underserved groups.



The poll found that most (about 80%) respondents have some level of familiarity with dental therapy. About 40 percent said they were either very or extremely familiar with this model. In terms of their potential for improving access to care, about 42 percent thought dental therapists could increase access for underserved patients; 33 percent believed they could not.

Nearly 30 percent of respondents expressed some level of interest in hiring a dental therapist if state law allowed, while about 67 percent said they were not interested. Finally, when asked whether there were any specific concerns about the care provided by dental therapists, 63 percent said yes, while 35 percent said no.



The survey evoked strong responses from many, ranging from statements such as “Cutting teeth by a non-dentist [is] not good at all,” to “they should practice independently.” The overwhelming concern among respondents who expressed apprehension over dental therapists was a perception that their training did not prepare them to perform surgical procedures. Meanwhile, comments on care quality from the few respondents that have worked with dental therapists were positive. Other concerns included an overuse of dental therapists by corporate dental practices to generate profit and dental therapists’ taking up practice in areas where there are ample dentists.

To continue the conversation, go to Quick Poll Results in the [Member Forum](#).