



## Dental tourism shows need for reform

Border crossings are a hot topic in American politics right now. But a different kind of border crossing has received far less attention. Arizonans are crossing into Mexico in droves to access dental care that is either unavailable — or unaffordable — in Arizona. Dental patients are traveling to towns such as Los Algodones, dubbed “Molar City,” which sits across the U.S.-Mexico border near Yuma. This small Mexican town is home to about 5,500 residents — and about 350 are dentists. Nogales, Sonora, is also a rising dental-tourism destination.

Arizona patient Ramon was not only satisfied with his care, but he also paid about \$300 for a treatment that would have cost him about \$1,500 at home. This trend has become so popular that one Tucson dentist is offering prescreened referrals to Mexico dentists and shuttle service across the border.

Medical tourism, or when Americans travel to foreign countries to obtain health care, is rapidly growing. It is being driven in large part by a lack of accessible and affordable dental care herein the U.S.

According to Patients Beyond Borders, a medical-tourism organization that connects patients with medical professionals and facilities around the world, about half of the 1.2 to 1.3 million U.S. travelers who seek care abroad are traveling to Mexico for dental care.

According to federal data, almost 70 percent of Arizona is facing a shortage of dental-care professionals. Sadly, the dental establishment has actively resisted common-sense reforms that would legalize mid-level dental providers in the same way that nurse practitioners now provide routine care for patients.

A mid-level dental provider, commonly called a dental therapist, carries out routine, restorative dental procedures, like fillings and some tooth extractions. In Arizona, dentists are licensed to perform more than 400 procedures. Dental therapists who complete the medical education and professional training could be licensed to perform about 80 of those procedures.

In states that have created licensing regimes for mid-level dentists, dental therapy students are trained to the same standards as those studying to become dentists for the procedures that both professionals provide to patients.

While the dental establishment claims that these changes would threaten patient safety, the real-world safety and quality evidence is overwhelming. Dental therapy is relatively new in the United States, but the concept is not.

Beginning in the 1920s, more than 50 countries around the world began utilizing these dental providers. After decades of international experience, and data from a growing number of states in the U.S. that allow dental therapists, more than 1,000 studies and evaluations confirm that mid-level dental providers are safe and deliver high-quality care.

To increase dental access and affordability for Arizonans, state lawmakers should license dental therapists. By making it legal to practice at the top of one's medical education and professional training, Arizona legislators can promote access, choice and affordability in dental care.

For many people, not having accessible and affordable dental treatment options means enduring acute pain and eventually seeking relief in hospital emergency rooms — or worse, facing additional ailments and medical complications that result from a lack of basic care. In many cases, the additional costs of treating preventable dental conditions in the expensive emergency department are shared by taxpayers.

Too often, our state laws protect the special interests of medical professionals rather than the interests of the public. The result is high prices and a lack of access to health-care services.

Arizona lawmakers have an opportunity to put patients first so that every Arizonan, especially the most vulnerable, can have access to the dental care they need — closer to home.

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