

Legislation would give dental hygienists more leeway in treating patients

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Idaho's dental hygienists will ask lawmakers this year for more freedom in how they practice their trade.

The [Idaho Dental Hygienists Association](#) said it has sponsors for two pieces of legislation being introduced for the first time this year. One would allow hygienists to perform restorative functions – such as placing fillings – in all settings under supervision, including dental offices. The other would authorize hygienists to perform certain procedures, such as applying sealants, without the supervision of a dentist if they hold a specific license for that purpose.

The hygienists will face opposition from the [Idaho State Dental Association](#), which has said the measures would increase costs to Medicaid, the federal program that reimburses health providers for treating the poor and disabled.

“As this state agonizes over another round of more painful budget cuts, this is not a good time to expand providers,” said ISDA spokesman Scott Kido, a dentist in Nampa, Dec. 30. “In the near future we would appreciate the opportunity to work together with the IDHA to develop an effective program to reduce the level of dental disease in the Medicaid population.”

Several states and the federal organizations are discussing the role of hygienists as they look for ways to lower health costs. Many conversations involve preventive care, such as education, screening for disease, and the application of dental sealants.

With the proposed legislation on restorative functions, Idaho hygienists are only asking for the right to do what hygienists already do in Washington, said Liz Nies, president of the 200-member association. There, hygienists have been allowed for 30 years to place and carve filling material after the tooth has been prepared by the dentist.

Many Idaho dentists privately say they do support measures that would increase access to care – including expanding the scope of practice for hygienists. If the legislation passes, it will likely require rulemaking by the [Idaho Board of Dentistry](#).

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