

The Daily Tar Heel

State's dentist shortage is dire

Uneven dispersion afflicts some areas

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STAFF WRITER

Future N.C. residents might have limited access to dental care if the distribution of dentists continues to favor urban over rural areas over the next few years.

A 2007 report from the UNC Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research shows that North Carolina is facing a shortage of dentists that might leave the health services industry unable to cope with the state's population growth.

The report says that of 100 counties in N.C., 28 have fewer than 1.5 dentists per 10,000 people.

"There is a large under-served population in our state," said Dr. Annelise Hardin, a Chapel Hill pediatric dentist, emphasizing the importance of dentistry. "There are a lot of long-term consequences without dental care."

Four N.C. counties are completely without a practicing dentist and five currently have dentists older than

65, said Erin Fraher, director of N.C. Health Professions Data System and a collaborator on the report.

Fraher said her biggest concern was that the dentist distribution was so uneven. Many dentists in rural areas are nearing retirement age and have no replacement.

John Williams, dean of the UNC School of Dentistry, said UNC is already encouraging its graduates to practice in rural areas.

"We really concentrate on the under-served areas," he said.

Williams cited the Dentistry In Service to Communities program, which places students in areas with fewer dental practitioners, as one of the school's outreach efforts.

But this program, Williams said, only placed students in rural areas for four weeks at a time twice a year.

The program brings students to under-served areas in the hope that some might return to those communities.

Williams said 80 percent of UNC-

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DR. ANNELISE HARDIN, PEDIATRIC DENTIST

system dentistry students practice in state when they graduate.

About 80 students graduate from the School of Dentistry per year at UNC.

Dr. Alec Parker, the executive director at the N.C. Dental Society, emphasized the importance of increasing dental student enrollment. He touted a plan to increase UNC's graduates by 20 and increase East Carolina University's by 50.

Parker said he expected the increase to meet the needs of the statewide population.

But Adam Searing, director of the N.C. Health Access Council, said that with a growing population of more than 9.2 million, a 70-person increase was not enough.

Searing said the coming population boom would create more need

than current programs were providing for.

"North Carolina didn't start out bad in comparison with other states, the other states moved forward," Searing said.

Fraher said the current economic recession might actually encourage trained dentists not currently practicing to return to work.

With 33 percent of N.C. dentists trained but not working, this potentially has very beneficial effects, she said.

Incoming practitioners decreased from 144 in 2004-05 to 63 in 2006-07, Fraher said, adding that even if those numbers were greater, uneven distribution might remain.

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OPEN AND SAY 'AHH'

A report shows that North Carolina faces a shortage of dentists that might limit access to dental care, especially in rural areas.