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Testimony in Opposition
LD 1803
An Act to Amend the Laws Governing Optometric Practice
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Senator Bailey, Representative Mathieson, distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services, my name is Dr. Katelyn Allen and I am a resident of Yarmouth, Maine. I am a practicing dentist in Portland and I am submitting this testimony against LD 1803--An Act to Amend Laws Governing Optometric Practice.

Dentistry and optometry are both specialized fields that demand extensive knowledge of a specific area of the body and typically involve completing a four-year professional program. However, dentistry programs are uniquely structured to equip graduates with the skills needed to perform surgical procedures immediately upon graduation.

The Demanding Hands-On Training of Dental School

Dental school is one of the most rigorous professional programs, and much of its intensity stems from the extensive hands-on training required to become a competent and confident practitioner. Unlike many academic paths that are primarily theoretical, dental education is deeply rooted in practical skill-building. From the first year to graduation, students are immersed in technical and clinical experiences that challenge both their minds and their manual abilities.

From Classroom to Clinic: A Gradual Transition

The early years of dental school include foundational science courses, but even during this phase, students begin preclinical laboratory work. In simulation labs, they practice procedures on mannequins, learning the intricate hand movements required for tasks like cavity preparation, crown shaping, and root canal treatment. These labs are more than just practice—they are structured to mimic the clinical environment as closely as possible, reinforcing not only technical skills but also professional behavior and patient management techniques.

Mastering Technical Skills Through Repetition and Precision

Dental procedures demand exacting standards of precision, and there is no substitute for practice. Students spend countless hours refining their tactile sensitivity and motor control—skills that cannot be learned from textbooks alone. Drilling even a millimeter too deep can damage nerves or other vital structures in a real patient. The pressure to develop fine motor skills is constant, and students are required to demonstrate their competence repeatedly through practical exams and clinical competencies.

Real Patient Care and Clinical Experience

By the third year, students shift into treating real patients under the supervision of licensed faculty. This is where dental training becomes especially intense. Students are responsible for developing treatment plans, administering anesthesia, performing restorations, and managing patient communication. Every patient presents unique anatomical, medical, and emotional challenges, and students must adapt their technical skills accordingly. The stakes are high—mistakes can have real consequences, and faculty oversight is rigorous.

Balancing Technical Work with Academic Demands

What makes dental school particularly challenging is the need to juggle hands-on clinical work with academic studies. While perfecting clinical procedures, students must also master subjects like pathology, pharmacology, and radiology, which inform their decisions in patient care. The combination of mental and physical demands creates a workload that often stretches beyond a typical full-time schedule, requiring exceptional discipline and stamina.

Shaping Skilled and Safe Practitioners

The hands-on training in dental school is not just about technical mastery—it's about preparing students to make critical decisions, communicate clearly with patients, and maintain high standards of safety and ethics. By the time students graduate, they are expected to perform complex procedures independently, having already gained hundreds of hours of experience treating patients directly.

Conclusion

Dental school is rigorous because it has to be. The hands-on training is not only central to the curriculum—it is the heart of what transforms a student into a practitioner. Through relentless practice, real-world patient care, and constant feedback, dental students are shaped into skilled professionals ready to take on the responsibility of oral health care. The intensity of this training ensures that every graduate is not only knowledgeable, but also clinically competent and confident in their craft.

I have great respect for the profession of optometry; however, I have concerns about expanding the scope of practice in Maine to allow optometrists to perform eye surgery without undergoing the same rigorous surgical training required of other medical professionals, such as occurs in the field of dentistry.