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New Authority for Nurses Would Improve Health Care

Legislation that would make key improvements to Missouri health-care policy had a hearing this week, and I am working to ensure this legislation receives the attention it deserves. This measure, which has bipartisan support, will give advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) prescriptive authority in order to improve access to health care in rural and urban areas.

Senate Bills 566 and 576, respectively sponsored by a Democrat and Republican, authorize APRNs to prescribe schedule II, III, IV or V controlled substances. Forty-six other states have given their APRN's this authority. In other words, when you go in to see the doctor, these qualified professionals would be allowed to prescribe the medicines you need. This is extremely important in rural and urban environments. APRNs with prescriptive authority would be able to supplement the shortage of doctors in rural areas. This new authority would also allow quicker treatment to patients when doctors are unavailable in medically underserved areas, both urban and rural.

This legislation is also needed to correct an inadvertent consequence of an anti-methamphetamine measure passed in 2005. That bill prohibited the over-the-counter sale of medicines containing pseudoephedrine, an element commonly used to make meth. Now customers must go to the pharmacy to obtain these medicines, which are used to treat cold and allergy symptoms. However, the legislation implementing this new law unfortunately contained language prohibiting APRNs from writing prescriptions for medicines containing pseudoephedrine. These medical professionals are not even allowed to write prescriptions for certain types of common allergy medicines like Allegra D and Zertec D. This oversight needs to be corrected.

Another important element of this legislation is that doctors can retain oversight of the APRNs' new prescriptive authorities. The bills require collaborative practice agreements among doctors and nurses, so doctors can restrict nurses' prescribing capabilities if they so choose. In other words, doctors retain their ability to oversee the actions of APRNs.

For the sake of patients throughout our state, we need to catch up to the rest of the nation on this issue. It is in all of our best interests. Approving this measure would be one small step toward more affordable, efficient health care delivery.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278.

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