Dental therapist is a new role in the United States, according to Kathryn Leiviska. “It's existed in other countries in the world, but never here,” she said. “In 2008, people from the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry traveled the world to look at different types of programs.” The enabling legislation was implemented in 2009. Leiviska became part of the first U of M graduating class in 2011.

“The simplest way to explain is that a dental therapist is like a nurse practitioner or physician assistant, but for a dentist,” Leiviska said. “I specialize in fillings, working with children and helping increase access to care. That lets the dentist focus on root canals, crowns and working with medically compromised patients.”

In addition to doing restorative work, Minnesota’s legislation lets the dental therapist extract baby teeth, do stainless steel crowns and assist with new patient exams and education. Prophylaxis continues to be done by the dental hygienist. “We're the first job ever to actually have restrictions on who we can see,” Leiviska said. Dental therapists work in underserved areas or serve at least 50 percent patients in state insurance programs.

Minnesota’s rural areas lack dentists — there is only one dental office in Cook County, Leiviska said. Some urban areas, like the HealthPartners Midway Dental Clinic in St. Paul, where Leiviska works, are also underserved. “There aren’t enough dentists for the general population, let alone for people with state insurance,” she said.

Leiviska was a pre-med undergraduate. She “shadowed a ton of different occupations, but didn’t find anything I was passionate about,” she said. She landed on dentistry after reading about the U of M dental simulation clinic in the Gopher newspaper. She was trying to decide between dentistry and dental hygiene when the new dental therapy program opened up.

“I pulled back my other applications and applied for dental therapy,” she said. “It’s very needed, and I get to go in on time and leave on time, and I don’t have to take a lot of work home with me.”

The biggest roadblock to dental therapists has been “acceptance within our own community,” Leiviska said. “There’s acceptance among patients. I’ve never had anyone say, 'I’d rather see a dentist.' HealthPartners saw the benefit right away.”

Leiviska said students in dental therapy “are taught side by side with dental students, we take the same exams and patient boards. We’re trained to the same level.” The only difference, she said, is that dentists have a wider scope of practice. “It’s much less expensive to hire me to do the exact same thing.”

What’s the best part of your job as a dental therapist?

Working with this population has been the biggest benefit. The HealthPartners Midway Clinic is 95 percent medical assistance or state-based insurance. That’s really been the most rewarding part. Most people I treat are so appreciative.

What’s been the biggest challenge?

We were the inaugural class. It’s something new — like physician assistants, nobody knew how to deal with them or incorporate them into the practice. Dental hygienists were the last big change in dentistry.

What does it take to be successful in this career?

The service heart — that’s why this position was created, to increase access to care. My goal was to serve the population. You get to make a huge difference.