

Editorial: If they're serious about healthcare reform, lawmakers should set nurse practitioners free

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As they've led the push for healthcare reform on Capitol Hill, Republicans have said they've been guided by the twin principles of consumer choice and lower costs.

But while national Republicans have found their interests frustrated by the realities of partisan politics, Republicans who control the Pennsylvania General Assembly have a chance to actually put those principles into action by passing legislation allowing nurse practitioners to operate independently.

Bills now before the state [House](#) and [Senate](#) would put Pennsylvania in the company of 21 other states that now allow these skilled professionals to provide people with the care and services they'd normally receive from their family doctor, including diagnosing illnesses, interpreting medical tests, and, critically, prescribing medications.

Under current state law, however, nurse practitioners are required to have a formal agreement with two physicians putting them directly under their supervision. The requirement appears less to do with ensuring quality care and [more to do with physicians protecting their turf](#).

The limitations of that arrangement were seen in the starkest terms in 2014, when the Sadler Center Health Center in Carlisle [saw an abrupt exodus by its doctors](#), leaving several thousand, low-income patients without medical care.

Those resignations resulted in the cancellation of their contracts with the nurse practitioners who also worked there. Had those nurse practitioners been allowed to operate on their own, the care afforded to those patients would have continued uninterrupted.

That's the choice part.

Now the part about cost.

According to a [2014 report by the Federal Trade Commission](#), the costs that both physicians and nurse practitioners incur setting up their supervision agreements are inevitably passed on to patients, but do not result in higher quality care.

Meanwhile, allowing nurse practitioners to operate independently would meet a rising demand for primary care services, [according to a 2015 report](#) by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

A 2011 report by The National Academy of Medicine further stressed that nurse practitioners [augment, but do not replace](#), the services provided by trained physicians. That makes them valuable adjuncts - not competitors.

And if you've ever tried to schedule an appointment with your family doctor or found yourself camped out in a waiting room, cooling your heels while waiting to be seen, that's only a good thing.

The proposals now before lawmakers abolishes the supervision mandate. But it also addresses concerns of physicians would impose a strict transition period, requiring nurse practitioners to be supervised for three years and 3,600 hours before they'd be allowed to operate on their own.

That compromise language has the [backing of the Hospital and Healthcare Association of Pennsylvania](#), a trade group representing hospitals. It's identical to a 2015 proposal, [sponsored by former Sen. Patricia Vance, R-Cumberland](#), that made the rounds during last year's legislative session.

Last year, the powerful Pennsylvania Medical Society opposed the bill, arguing that it would "destroy team-based medical care."

The trade organization advocated instead for "[promoting] existing law that allows both physicians and nurse practitioners to exercise the full range of medical knowledge available at the moment it is needed."

The Senate version of the bill, sponsored by [Sen. Camera Bartolotta, R-Westmoreland](#), is currently before the House Professional Licensure Committee, where it's been marooned since it landed there in April. It was approved by [a 38-11 vote](#) in the Senate in April, with both Republicans and Democrats voting in favor.

The House version of the bill, sponsored by [Rep. Jesse Topper, R-Bedford](#), is similarly stranded in the House oversight committee.

Since the Bartolotta bill has already cleared the Senate, the oversight committee should report the bill to the full House for consideration. The House, then, should approve it, and send it to Gov. Tom Wolf for his signature.

Harrisburg Republicans frequently make happy noises about reform and increasing consumer choice. These bills allow them the opportunity to walk their talk.