

24 August 2026

Media release

Dental leaders call for sugary drink levy to tackle NZ's preventable tooth decay epidemic

A levy on sugary drinks could save the health system up to \$2.2 billion, according to a White Paper released today calling for a Sugary Drink Industry Levy.

The New Zealand Dental Association (NZDA) paper proposes a tiered excise tax on sugary drinks, modelled on the UK's Soft Drinks Industry Levy and scaled by sugar content, with all revenue ring-fenced for funded dental care, community oral health programmes, and water fountains in schools.

"Tooth decay is the most common preventable disease in this country, and sugary drinks are one of the biggest drivers of it," says Dr Rob Beaglehole, NZDA Senior Advisor.

"We know what works. The UK brought in a levy in 2018 and saw a real drop in kids ending up in hospital to have teeth pulled out under general anaesthetic.

"New Zealand is falling behind while thousands of children, some barely out of nappies, are having teeth removed for entirely preventable reasons."

The White Paper argues the levy would also reduce health inequities, given Māori and Pasifika children carry the highest rates of severe tooth decay and stand to gain the most from reduced disease and reinvested funding.

The \$2.2 billion figure comes from modelling by University of Otago researchers, based on a 20 percent levy, over the lifetime of the current population.

With the general election just months away, NZDA is calling on all parties to say where they stand on the levy before New Zealanders vote in November.

Dr Beaglehole says the case comes down to who picks up the bill.

"Right now, taxpayers are covering the hospital bills for a problem the sugary drink industry is causing.

"That's not fiscally responsible, and in fact, it's a subsidy for bad products.

"This levy is targeted, it's simple to collect, and every dollar goes straight back into cutting future health costs. "By November every party should be telling voters how they'll stop taxpayers footing this bill.

"This isn't about telling people what to drink. It's about making the healthy choice the easy choice, and making the companies profiting from this pay their fair share towards fixing it.

"Every year we wait is another year of kids in hospital for something we know how to prevent. The Government has the evidence, it has the tool, and it has 116 countries showing it works. It's time to act."

The full White Paper, *Sugary Drink Industry Levy in Aotearoa New Zealand*, is attached and available at roadmap.nzda.org.nz

-ENDS-

Editor's note

The White Paper's release closes National Oral Health Month, and coincides with [the New Zealand Dental 2026 Congress](#) in Auckland, hosted jointly by NZDA, the New Zealand Oral Health Association and the New Zealand Institute of Dental Technologists. Congress attendees include several internationally recognised oral health figures, available for media interview on request:

- **Asst. Prof. Dr Nikolai Sharkov**, dental medicine specialist and President of the FDI World Dental Federation
- **Enzo Bondioni**, Executive Director, FDI World Dental Federation
- **Richard J Johnson MD**, Emeritus Professor of Medicine, University of Colorado

Media contact:

James Paul
M: 022 514 0716