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Media release

Adult dental waiting list barely moving, new report card shows

Dental care waiting lists for adults requiring care in hospital have barely moved in a year, according to the first ever report card on the state of oral health.

Launched today by the New Zealand Dental Association (NZDA) to kick off National Oral Health Month, the 2026 Oral Health Report Card scores oral health across age groups and access to care.

The report card draws on priorities identified in the NZDA Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health for New Zealand, covering children, young adults, older people, people with disabilities and access to care.

The adult waiting list has dropped only slightly, from 1,348 in October 2024 to 1,274 in October 2025, with hospital discharges for adults stuck at around 186 a month over the same period.

The Government's target is for 95% of patients to wait less than four months for treatment, a target the report card says is unlikely to be met for adults.

Dr Dave Excell, NZDA President, says the adults left waiting are the ones who can least afford to.

"These are high-needs patients, people with disabilities, frailty, and other health conditions who can only be treated in a main hospital.

"The bottleneck isn't just the demand, it's also the access to hospital facilities. Until that's fixed, thousands of adults will keep waiting well past the point they should be treated."

By contrast, the children's waiting list dropped from 5,613 to 4,503 over the same period, with discharges rising from 898 to 1,005 a month.

NZDA Chief Executive Dr Mo Amso says that result looks good on paper, but it's been achieved the hard way.

"Dentists have been running Saturday lists and extra clinics to get that number down, and it's come at the cost of burnout.

"We don't even know how many more children are coming into the system behind them, but without that data, we can't say this is sustainable."

The report card also points to a stretched workforce.

Almost one in five private dental practices has an unfilled dentist vacancy, taking an average of 24 weeks to fill, and 15.6% of dentist and dental specialist positions in the public system are vacant.

The Government lifted its special needs dental grant from \$300 to \$1,000 in 2022, and uptake has grown.

But the report card shows the scheme reaches only around 84,000 people a year – less than 5% of the 1.775 million adults, 43% of the population, who say cost stops them getting the dental care they need.

That's less than 5% of the people who need help.

Dr Excell says the numbers in this report card are the result of decades without a plan.

"We've been patching this system for years, more funding here, a workforce tweak there, and it still isn't enough.

“We need a national oral health plan that funds community and hospital capacity properly and fixes the workforce pipeline, rather than another budget-by-budget top-up.”

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About National Oral Health Month

National Oral Health Month is a new month-long campaign replacing the single-day National Oral Health Day NZDA has run since 2014. Throughout August, NZDA will run weekly campaigns on brushing, the oral health workforce, and sugar in food, alongside advocacy activity with MPs and candidates ahead of the 2026 election.

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