



Health Policy Manifesto for Election 2026



Practical solutions to address New Zealanders' poor oral health statistics

Oral health is essential to overall health and wellbeing. Yet for too long, it has been treated as optional within New Zealand's health system. This has resulted in avoidable pain, inequity, growing pressure in our communities, and avoidable demand in our hospitals and primary health care system.

Oral diseases remain among the most common chronic conditions in New Zealand, disproportionately affecting Māori, Pacific peoples, people on low incomes, those with disabilities, and older adults.

New Zealand now faces a pivotal moment. Our oral health statistics show deeply entrenched inequities; the oral health workforce is under strain; prevention systems are incomplete; access is deeply inequitable; data, leadership and governance are fragmented; and vulnerable groups are too often left out of policy design.

The NZ Dental Association (NZDA) is calling on all political parties to commit to a coordinated, modern, equitable oral health system, one that recognises oral health as a fundamental part of healthcare and invests in sustainable solutions that will reduce cost, reduce suffering, and improve wellbeing nationwide.

This manifesto sets out three key election commitments that parties can adopt in the lead-up to Election 2026. They draw on the detailed *Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health For New Zealanders* and seven standalone *NZDA position papers* based on *The Roadmap*.

New Zealanders deserve an oral health system that is accessible, fair, prevention-focused, well-led and future-ready. The time to act is now.

Key Oral Health Priorities:

1. Build a Prevention-First Oral Health System
2. Ensure Fair, Timely, and Equitable Access to Oral Health Care
3. Build a Strong, Future-Ready Oral Health System





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1. Build a Prevention-First Oral Health System

Oral disease is largely preventable. Yet New Zealand continues to carry one of the highest rates of tooth decay in the OECD, and only 60 per cent of New Zealanders have access to fluoridated water. Children and adults continue to require avoidable hospital treatment because prevention has never been resourced at the level needed.

A prevention-first approach, with strong public health programmes, supportive policy settings, and nationally consistent access to proven interventions, will significantly reduce disease, save money, and ease pressure on the wider health system.

We call on all political Parties to commit to:

- Expanding community water fluoridation so that all New Zealanders can benefit where technically feasible.
- Strengthening sugar-reduction policies, including consideration of sugary drink levies, restrictions on marketing to children, and water-only policies in schools and public facilities.
- Investing in nationwide oral health promotion, normalising regular dental care and healthy habits across the life course.
- Improving oral health education in early childhood, schools, and communities, with targeted support for high-needs populations.
- Embedding dentists and oral health professionals into broader health promotion work, reflecting the clear links between oral disease and diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic conditions.

[Read the full Prevention Position Paper](#)

2. Ensure Fair, Timely, and Equitable Access to Oral Health Care

More than half of adults avoid the dentist because of cost. Māori, Pacific peoples, rural communities, disabled people, and older adults face disproportionate barriers. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of children are overdue for care, and hospital dental services for those with complex needs are under severe strain.

Access to oral health care must not depend on where someone lives, how old they are, or their ability to pay. Oral health is essential healthcare and must be treated as such.

We call on all political Parties to commit to:

- Recognising oral health as a core component of universal health coverage, not an optional extra.
- Targeting investment to those most in need, including young adults, low-income families, Māori and Pacific communities, disabled people, older adults and people with complex medical conditions.
- Improving and modernising child and adolescent oral health services, ensuring timely, culturally responsive delivery and reducing long wait lists.
- Strengthening dental pathways for disabled people and those with complex health needs, including consistent funding for hospital dental units, and community-based services capable of providing appropriate care.
- Developing a national oral health policy for older adults, ensuring continuity of care between home, community and aged-care facilities, including oral health assessments at key transition points.
- Aligning funding and responsibilities across Health, ACC, and MSD so that New Zealanders can access timely and affordable care without unnecessary barriers.

[Read the full Access to Care Position Paper](#)

[Read the full Older Adults Position Paper](#)

[Read the full Complex Needs & Disabilities Position Paper](#)





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3. Build a Strong, Future-Ready Oral Health System

New Zealand's oral health workforce is under significant strain. There are not enough dentists or oral health therapists, especially in rural and high-needs regions. The pipeline is too small, recruitment is difficult, and wellbeing pressures are driving burnout.

At the same time, New Zealand lacks strong clinical governance structures, with no national oral health strategy, no dedicated oral health units at the Ministry or Health NZ, and minimal system-level data. Without investment in workforce and leadership, inequities will deepen and service quality will deteriorate.

We call on all political Parties to commit to:

- Growing the oral health workforce pipeline, including more funded university places, scholarships, and pathways for Māori and Pacific students.
- Improving retention and regional distribution, with incentives for practice in underserved communities and better access to professional development.
- Embedding clinician wellbeing into workforce planning, recognising that safe, sustainable practice improves care quality.
- Re-establishing dedicated oral health leadership structures, including fully resourced oral health units in the Ministry of Health and Health NZ.
- Appointing a senior national clinical leader for oral health, supported by a multidisciplinary advisory network.
- Developing a national oral health strategy, with clear accountability, consistent standards, transparent reporting and fit-for-purpose data systems.
- Integrating oral health into all relevant government strategies, including chronic disease, ageing, disability, equity and workforce plans.

[Read the full Workforce Position Paper](#)

[Read the full Clinical Governance Position Paper](#)

Conclusion

Oral health is a powerful driver of physical health, mental wellbeing, social participation, economic opportunity and quality of life. Yet for decades, New Zealand has treated it as peripheral, resulting in inequity, unnecessary hospitalisations, avoidable chronic disease burden, and growing pressure on the health system.

The NZDA's Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health for New Zealanders sets out a clear, evidence-based direction for change. By adopting the commitments in this manifesto, political Parties can deliver:

- Less preventable disease
- Less pressure on hospitals
- More equitable outcomes
- A stronger, connected health system
- Healthier, happier communities

The NZDA stands ready to work with all Parties, policymakers and communities to ensure that oral health is finally recognised, prioritised and integrated within New Zealand's health system.

Better oral health is achievable, and the benefits will be felt across generations.

The NZDA calls on all political Parties to make oral health a core part of their health policy commitments for Election 2026.

