

Our position

Every New Zealander has the right to good oral health.

Yet for too many adults, cost, fear and access barriers make dental care out of reach.

NZDA is calling for a long-term commitment to making dental care accessible, equitable, and integrated into the wider health system – starting with those most in need.

The problem

Access to oral health care in New Zealand is deeply unequal.

Children and adolescents have access to publicly-funded care, but many miss out due to service delays and workforce shortages. For some adults, cost is the main barrier; more than half avoid dental visits because they can't afford them. Among adults in the highest deprivation group, 52 per cent avoided dental care in the past year due to cost, compared to only 18 per cent who skipped GP visits.

People on low incomes, Māori, Pacific peoples, older adults, and those with disabilities, are most affected. As a result, preventable dental problems end up in hospital emergency departments, creating avoidable costs and suffering.

Around 9,000 children each year undergo a general anaesthetic to have teeth repaired and removed because of decay – one of the leading causes of avoidable hospitalisations for children.

The background

Oral health is integral to general health, but our system treats it as optional. For example, between 2017–2021, the number of children overdue for care rose from 118,518 to 321,680. By 2024, 34 per cent of New Zealand children were still overdue for funded dental care.

Funding for adult dental care has not kept pace with need or with a population maintaining teeth into senior adult years. Policy settings separate oral health from mainstream healthcare. Only 36 per cent of adults in the highest deprivation quintile visited a dentist in the past 12 months; 72 per cent go only when there's a problem.

This fragmentation means that people often can't access timely, affordable care, even for urgent needs.

It also means dentists, who can play a crucial role in early detection of wider health issues, are under-utilised within the health system.

The current approach creates inequity, inefficiency, and unnecessary hardship.

The solution

- Integrate oral health into universal health coverage: oral care must be recognised as essential healthcare.
- Target funding to those most in need: improve funding for young adults and focus on initiatives for low-income adults, Māori and Pacific communities, people with disabilities and dependent older adults.
- Modernise child and adolescent oral health services: ensure timely, equitable access and culturally responsive delivery.
- Align funding and policy: coordinate across Health, ACC and Social Development to remove system barriers.

The NZDA is urging the incoming Government to invest now in making oral health care properly accessible.

Doing so will prevent pain for thousands of New Zealanders, reduce hospital admissions and costs, and support overall wellbeing across generations.

It is a smart investment – and a matter of fairness.