

Our position

Every New Zealander with a disability or complex health condition has the right to good oral health. Yet for people with disabilities and complex health needs, access to dental care is inconsistent, fragmented and often unavailable.

The NZDA is calling for an integrated, equitable approach to oral health care that ensures people with disabilities and complex health needs can access appropriate services in both community and hospital settings, delivered by a well-supported, connected workforce.

The problem

New Zealanders living with disabilities or complex medical conditions face major barriers to oral health care. Services are fragmented and vary greatly across the country.

Hospital dental units provide treatment for those who require general anaesthetic or special management, but capacity is limited and waiting lists are long. Community-based services, where they exist, are often not equipped to cater to patients with disabilities or chronic health conditions.

This means many people are unable to access timely, affordable or appropriate dental care. For some, routine treatment is delayed until pain or infection becomes severe enough to require hospital admission. For others, especially those not eligible for hospital-based services, there may be no realistic care pathway at all.

The background

The Ministry of Disabled People estimates that over one million New Zealanders live with a disability. Health NZ reports one in four live with multiple chronic health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke or cancer. These conditions increase the risk of oral disease and make maintaining oral health more complex.

Hospital dental services are inconsistently available across regions. Some hospitals lack dedicated dental facilities altogether. The *NZDA Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health* notes that shortages in the hospital dental workforce are limiting service delivery nationwide.

Meanwhile, people who do not qualify for hospital care have few funded options in the community. General dental practices often lack the specialist training, facilities or support to provide care for patients with significant disabilities or health complexities.

The NZDA supports professional development for dentists and oral health professionals, the use of multidisciplinary teams, and the design of service models that bridge the gap between community and hospital care.

The solution

- Recognise oral health as essential healthcare for people of all ages with disabilities and complex health needs.
- Ensure equitable access: fund hospital dental units consistently across the country, with clear pathways for patients to transition between hospital and community-based care.
- Expand community capacity: support dentists and oral health professionals through training, infrastructure and funding to deliver appropriate care in primary and community settings.
- Integrate oral health into wider health planning: include oral health in disability and chronic disease strategies, ensuring shared information systems and coordinated care across providers.
- Invest in the workforce: expand specialist and general training to build confidence in treating people with disabilities and complex needs, and fund multidisciplinary models of care.

The NZDA is urging the incoming Government to ensure oral health for people with disabilities and complex health needs is no longer be left to chance. It must be planned, funded, and integrated into the health system that serves everyone.