

Our position

Every older New Zealander has the right to good oral health; it's central to general health and wellbeing. Yet many older adults can't access even basic dental care because New Zealand lacks a coherent oral health policy for them.

As a result, large numbers of older adults live with preventable pain, infection and loss of function.

The NZDA is calling for an integrated approach to oral health that recognises older adults as a priority population within universal health coverage, ensures continuity of care between community and aged-care settings, and supports prevention across the life course.

The problem

Older New Zealanders are retaining more of their natural teeth for longer, but the oral health system has not adapted to meet their changing needs.

The 2012 *Older People's Oral Health Survey* found that among people in residential care, 61 per cent had untreated decay and one-third had untreated root decay. Even among those living at home with assistance, 43 per cent had untreated decay. It's a sad indictment that no updated national data has been collected since.

Despite this clear evidence of need, New Zealand has no dedicated oral health policy for older adults. Access to care is highly variable, and aged-care facilities often lack clear oral health protocols, trained staff, and access to visiting dental services. Oral health is rarely integrated into wider health assessments or care plans.

This lack of policy direction means preventable dental disease contributes to pain, malnutrition, reduced quality of life and increased hospital admissions for systemic complications, including aspiration pneumonia and sepsis.

The background

An aging population means the number of older adults with complex oral health needs is growing. The *NZDA Roadmap Towards Better Oral Health* identifies older adults as a vulnerable group who are too often excluded from system design and funding priorities.

As with other inequities in oral health, outcomes are worse for Māori, Pacific peoples, and those in lower-income or rural communities.

The current health system separates oral health from mainstream health services, leaving dentists disconnected from primary and aged-care teams. There is no systematic requirement for oral health assessment on entry to residential care, and preventive interventions, such as high-fluoride toothpaste or staff oral health training, are not consistently available.

The solution

- Integrate oral health into universal health coverage: oral care must be recognised as essential healthcare for older adults.
- Develop a national oral health policy for older people, including prevention, workforce development and consistent standards for care in residential and home-based settings.
- Ensure continuity of care: embed oral health into aged-care plans, require oral health assessments at key transition points (e.g. entry to care), and provide visiting dental and hygiene services to aged-care facilities.
- Target prevention and equity: expand access to high-fluoride toothpaste, tailored preventive programmes, and culturally appropriate oral health education for whānau, caregivers and aged-care staff.
- Fund and connect: align oral health policy and funding across Health, ACC and Social Development so that older adults can access timely, affordable care and dentists are supported to participate as part of the wider healthcare system.

The NZDA is urging the incoming Government to invest appropriately in the oral health of older adults. No one should suffer unnecessary pain in later years because dental care is seen as optional.