

## Our position

**New Zealand's oral health workforce is under growing strain.**

**We need a sustainable, well-supported dental workforce that reflects the communities it serves and can meet the country's oral health needs into the future.**

**The NZDA calls on Government to make the oral health workforce a national priority – supporting recruitment, training, and wellbeing so that all New Zealanders can access quality dental care, wherever they live.**

## The problem

New Zealand doesn't have enough dentists, dental specialists and oral health therapists to meet current and future demand.

For example, between 2012 and 2024, the ratio of dentists to population in New Zealand declined by nearly five per cent. Health NZ's Workforce Plan 2023/24 identifies a 20 per cent shortfall of oral health therapists.

Too few students are being trained locally – New Zealand funds only 60 dental student places per year, through a single provider (University of Otago), and this has not increased since the mid-1980s.

Workforce shortages are already limiting access to care and increasing regional inequities – particularly for Māori, Pacific, rural and low-income communities.

## The background

The dental workforce has grown slowly while the population – and its oral health needs – has increased.

In addition, only 4.4 per cent of dentists are Māori and 1.8 per cent are Pacific. Reliance on overseas-trained personnel – who make up around one-third of the total dentist workforce and nearly 45 per cent of dental specialists – is unsustainable.

Public oral health services face acute shortages, while private practices in many regions struggle to fill vacancies.

Dental professionals are also under pressure. Long hours, stress, and workforce shortages are taking a toll on wellbeing, creating retention challenges and threatening the quality of care.

NZDA's own research shows high levels of stress and burnout. Nearly 40 per cent of urban/suburban dentists and over 60 per cent of rural dentists reported workloads greater than they would like. Supporting wellbeing isn't just good for practitioners – it's essential for ensuring safe, sustainable, high-quality care.

## The solution

- Invest in growing the workforce pipeline: expand funded training places, scholarships, pathways for Māori and Pacific students and ensure the university is funded to accommodate these students.
- Support retention and regional distribution: incentivise practice in underserved areas and ensure equitable access to continuing education and professional development.
- Recognise wellbeing as a workforce issue: embed wellbeing into dental policy and workplace culture.
- Include dentistry and oral health services in national workforce planning: oral health must be fully integrated into Aotearoa's health workforce strategies.

The NZDA is urging the incoming Government to invest now in New Zealand's dental workforce. Doing so will mean healthier communities, stronger regional services, and a sustainable oral health system for the future.