

New Zealand emphasises on dental healthcare for children

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Dental decay is the most prevalent non-communicable childhood disease in New Zealand



Urgent and radical change is needed to address the declining dental health of Aotearoa's children, but the problem is too huge to be tackled by just one service, a group of oral specialists say.

A paper published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, led by University of Otago paediatric dentistry senior lecturer Dr Dorothy Boyd, says dental decay is the most prevalent non-communicable childhood disease in New Zealand. Māori, Pasifika, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and those without access to community water fluoridation are most affected.

Aotearoa has a long tradition of providing publicly funded dental care for children and young people, yet by age 5, 60 per cent of Māori, 70 per cent of Pasifika, and 33 per cent of non-Māori/non Pasifika children have already experienced dental decay, Dr Boyd says.

"Early childhood caries, disease in young children's teeth, has been described as a modern neglected epidemic and is getting worse.

Despite the hard work of dental professionals in the midst of the early childhood caries tsunami, every part of the oral health care system is stressed, with long waiting lists, inconsistent collaboration between primary, secondary and tertiary care, and inconsistent access to, and types of, care offered across the country.

The entire oral healthcare workforce is under-resourced, and Māori and Pasifika are under-represented in it. The problem is too far-reaching to be managed without a collaborative and co-ordinated approach across health and society as a whole", Dr Boyd says.