

Submission
No 41

INQUIRY INTO DENTAL SERVICES IN NSW

Organisation:

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Telephone:

Date Received: 26/05/2005

Theme:

Summary

Submission - Inquiry into Dental Services in NSW

I am a Dental Therapist with 17 years experience, practicing dental therapy and promoting oral health in NSW, the ACT and East Arnhem Land, NT.

I am presenting this paper to support the submission of the Australian Dental and Oral Health Therapists Association Inc.

In my opinion, dental therapists are valuable and integral members of the oral health team and I welcome this opportunity to express my views and concerns to your Committee.

The dental therapy profession has evolved from its infancy in the early 1970's, into highly skilled clinicians who specialise in providing comprehensive dental treatment and oral health care to the younger members of our community and their families.

Initially, dental therapists were seen as an answer to providing an affordable workforce to provide dental treatment within the school dental service.

Four colleges of dental therapy were established in NSW to train and replace the expected high turnover of predominantly female staff.

Consequently, wages were low and the profession remained hidden within the public health system with limited career opportunities.

Today, the reality for dental therapy is very different.

Dental therapists have remained in the workforce and the colleges have closed.

The average age of dental therapists has increased and the next generation of dental therapists is in doubt.

However, the dental therapists currently employed in the public dental service continue to deliver high quality care, individually tailoring treatment plans to meet the needs of each patient, and taking into consideration the circumstances of parents and families.

The professional and personal qualities displayed by dental therapists with whom I have worked, include:

- * Highly developed clinical skills and professional judgement to diagnose and treat dental diseases and conditions,
- * Fine motor control to perform intricate procedures,

* Ability to perform "pain free" and at times uncomfortable dental procedures whilst maintaining co-operation from patient and accompanying family,

* Be compassionate and show empathy,

* Ability to impart knowledge and motivate patients and their families to practice oral health promoting habits and make healthy life style choices,

* Enthusiastically embrace new technologies and procedures to consistently provide the best possible care.

Despite these extraordinary clinical skills and professional qualities, dental therapists are seldom acknowledged by health professionals and sadly, in particular, by dentists and other dental specialists.

The only exception to this has been the dentists who work alongside dental therapists, witnessing first hand the vital role that dental therapists play in the oral health of children.

Outside this sphere, dental therapists have no profile and the NSW community is largely unaware of the profession.

Comments from allied dental colleagues who work in the private sector, suggest that dental therapists are generally derided and dismissed, perpetuating the false impression that dental therapists and the public dental health system provide second-rate care.

Children can be very challenging patients, and many dentists will openly admit that they are not willing or comfortable treating children.

Dental Therapists would be a valuable addition to a private practice but this right has been denied to them and those patients accessing dental care in the private sector in NSW.

There is a crisis in the dental service of NSW where the demand for dental treatment outstrips the capacity for the public system to deliver.

Recruitment of dentists and dental therapists into the public dental service has become increasingly difficult, leaving fewer to provide care.

The adult public dental health service provides treatment for the marginalised and disadvantaged in our community - including that 20% of the population who carry 80% of the disease burden.

With the majority dentists employed in the private sector, the remaining minority in the public system are left to deal with a disproportionate amount of often-acute dental disease.

Private practitioners may well have a distorted view of the overall oral health picture in this State and are unable to comprehend the strain on the public system.

An internship similar to that in the medical field may alleviate some staffing issues and equip the newly graduated dentist with a more realistic view of dentistry.

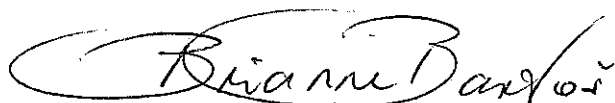
NSW needs to follow the lead of other Australian States and remove the limitations to private practice rights for dental therapists and lift the patient age limit from 18 years to 25 years, as other Australian States and Territories are doing.

In view of the lack of professional recognition, discriminatory restrictions on professional career choices and inadequate remuneration, it is a testament of the integrity of dental therapists as individuals and as a profession that we are able to present our perspective to your inquiry.

This hard copy is of my electronically lodged submission.

I trust that these comments are constructive, informative and received in the manner intended.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brianne Bartos". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "B".

Brianne Bartos

Dental Therapist, Northern Sydney Central Coast Health

26th May 2005

NB. I am prepared to appear before the Commission, if requested.

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