

Submission  
No 236

## INQUIRY INTO DENTAL SERVICES IN NSW

**Organisation:**

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**Telephone:**

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**Theme:**

**Summary**

Thursday, July 21, 2005

Ms Susan Want  
Standing Committee on Social Issues  
Inquiry into Dental Services in New South Wales  
NSW Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Want,

**Re: Inquiry into Dental Services in NSW**

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to put forward a submission on my thoughts regarding the current state of dental health in NSW. I feel that as a dental assistant who has been employed in both public and private dental surgeries that I have been well exposed to the current state of services.

As a current employee of Hunter New England Health, and having worked in various clinic locations, I can assure you that the current state of public dental services is at a crisis point. Dental operators (dentists and therapists) are taking an emergency-based approach to dental care – examinations and preventative dentistry are virtually non-existent. Patients are going on to waiting lists for even non-urgent fillings, and by the time they come off these waiting lists their dental problems will have escalated. Patients who have asked to be placed on a waiting list for an examination are being told by operators that it will be years (if ever) before they are recalled.

My recent past experience in working in dental and orthodontic surgeries in Maitland (regional area of NSW) indicates that even these private practices are under strain, with weeks before available appointments in general dental surgeries, and many months before initial consultations with specialists. Obviously this is nowhere near the extent of the strain experienced by public health services, but a worry none the same. I am aware of at least one dentist in Maitland who has his appointment book filled for at least six weeks in advance.

I am also currently a student at the University of Newcastle completing the new Bachelor of Oral Health degree and I believe that this new degree is a step in the right direction in improving dental services in NSW. However, I feel that the current state of dental services is in such a state that there needs to be more opportunities for us upon graduating to help restore these services.

With the ADA advocating the 'phasing out' of dental therapists, and the establishment of the new Bachelor of Oral Health degree at the University of Newcastle, there will be ever increasing numbers of dental hygienists seeking to make their contribution to dental

services in NSW. With the aim of producing approximately 50 graduates every year from 2007, and with an ever increasing demand on dental services, it makes sense to expand the role of the hygienist and provide more job opportunities.

Integral to an increasing contribution by dental hygienists is the modification of the legislation which significantly restricts the role of the hygienist. By allowing the hygienist to perform examinations for instance, they could work in the public health system to reduce waiting lists, while concurrently introducing preventative-based care that is so desperately needed. Hygienists could also provide services in a wider range of setting if restrictions were lifted regarding their direct supervision by a dentist. They would be able to work independently in aged care facilities, or travel to rural areas for small clinics, or to visit house bound citizens. With an ever increasing and aging population, chronic dental conditions such as periodontal disease pose a huge threat, and not only for oral health – these have been linked to other health conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Oral hygienists are able to make a great contribution to dental services, through oral health education and promotion. I believe the public are misinformed in regards to their oral health, and need to be better educated. Again, with an aging population who are retaining their teeth, more knowledge is needed so that these teeth are maintained. I find I am constantly bombarded with questions when I let others know that I am a dental assistant or oral health student. A person's teeth are very important to them – they affect their every day life through chewing, speaking, non-verbal communication and social relationships. I believe the general public want to know more about their oral health, but they don't know where or how to find answers to their questions. By allowing dental hygienists increasing independence, they could work with schools, clinics and aged care facilities to implement programs to help students, patients, senior citizens and even caregivers understand the importance of caring for the oral cavity.

Without these sorts of changes the oral health degree will not reach its full potential in helping to rectify the current state of dental services in NSW, and these services will only continue to deteriorate. I also fear that without these changes, limitations for hygienists and a decline in job opportunities will only hinder the current situation, and deter people from seeking training or employment in the dental field. I would also like to take this opportunity to briefly address the issue of dentist training in NSW, as I believe that the fact that it has been made a post-graduate degree is deterring school leavers and others who may be considering dentistry as a career choice.

While I can see that dental services in NSW are under great strain and are struggling, I believe this is a problem that can be solved, if you look towards the future of dental care and the role of the dental hygienist.

Yours sincerely,

Melanie Murphy