

Submission
No 72

INQUIRY INTO DENTAL SERVICES IN NSW

Organisation:

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Theme:

Summary

SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

30 MAY 2005

RECEIVED

The Director,
Standing Committee on Social Issues,
Legislative Council,
Parliament House,
Sydney 2000.

23/05/05

Dear Sirs/ Madams ,

Re Legislative Inquiry Into NSW Dental Services.

As a practising dental therapist of 30 years standing I wish to bring to your notice the continued discrimination meted out to the NSW Dental Therapists which in my humble opinion defies belief.

In other States and NZ dental therapists are by law permitted to work in private practice either by themselves or more often alongside a dental surgeon. In this state we are not permitted to do this and are restricted to working in a government dental clinic. I can imagine the outcry from unions, civil libertarians in fact most people who had a sense of decency and fair play if this discrimination was applied to teachers, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and the like.

The reasons for this policy have been given as, the therapist would be likely to work outside her training and what is called "scope". I can honestly say in all my years I have never been tempted to work outside my "scope" and if it was suggested to me by anyone including a superior I would (and have) refused to do so. The ADA appears to perpetuate this myth with no actual facts to back it up. All therapists I have encountered have a very strong sense of what they are permitted to do and what they are not.

A comparison to illustrate the absurdity of this policy could be made with the NSW solicitors. The NSW government brought in legislation to allow licensed conveyancers to undertake land transactions that had previously been the exclusive right of legal practitioners. Despite intense lobbying from the legal fraternity the legislation was introduced. This had the effect of legal practitioners having a reduced turnover in this area of law. This was done to a profession which had huge numbers. The total number of law students in NSW at present is numbered in the thousands attending at least 9 universities plus the Solicitors Admission Board course. By comparison the total number of dental surgery students is approximately 200 per year all concentrated at Sydney University. How many more teeth are there than houses one could suggest? What I am pointing out is that the monopoly the law practitioners had over the conveyancing was before the legislation was introduced far more evenly spread than the monopoly dentists have over teeth. Therefore the lawyers have suffered a financial downturn but will the dentists suffer a downturn if dental therapists are able to treat children and young adults in private practice? I don't think so.. many dentists have very long waiting lists.. even I as a member of the dental profession wait two months at least for an appointment and I know in country areas this wait extends to many more months.

Anecdotally there does not appear to be any evidence that licensed conveyancers are working outside their "scope".

It is well documented that there is and a shortage of dentists and dental personnel. Therefore the morality of private dentists protecting their patch needs to be questioned. You do not need 99 in the NSW HSC to be able to successfully administer routine dental treatment to young people in what is obviously a

demanding and often difficult environment. (I am aware there has been recent changes to the admission process to Sydney university dental course) Qualities such as kindness ,compassion, the ability to concentrate for long periods, judgement, manual dexterity ,empathy are all skills equally important and in my experience these are qualities dental therapists excel in. The other myth that is perpetuated by some members of the ADA is that they are the only ones who provides dentistry technically of the highest standard. I had a case quite recently when the mother was delighted to find a therapist to replace the new fillings that had been placed privately .They had all fallen out shortly after placement ,she had a large bill and wanted to go and demand her money back and lodge a complaint. I calmed her down , redid the fillings and saved the dentist in question from a unpleasant encounter. I wish I had a dollar for every parent that has commented “do you treat adults?”

I wonder who do the private dentists envisage will be treating the children and youth of tomorrows Australia? The closure of the Westmead training facility before new graduates of the Oral Health degree were able to be ready to actually get a child out of dental pain poses serious questions. There will be a serious shortage of graduates for some years, meanwhile there are more migrants , more consumption of poor diets than ever before and the continued failure of some councils to fluoridate the water all of which lead to serious issues of great concern.

The continuing policy of the govt to prohibit Dental Therapists to work in private practice has meant there has been no competition for decent wages for this profession and as a result so many wonderful workers have left to go to better paid professions. I know myself my three sons would not now all have university degrees if I had been in the position where I had to rely solely on the dental therapy wage. If a realistic wage structure was available with a career path there may be a possibility that competent people that in the past the government has spent money on training would be attracted back and with skilling upgrades could once again be attracted to this very important part of our health system . I was shocked to find recently that the assistant I had casually for the day was getting paid more than I was for the day. .Here was I , treating young patient after patient administering anaesthetic, extracting teeth , placing fillings ,calming and explaining treatments to nervous parents, making sure medical history suited treatment I was about to undertake as well as having the responsibility for correct signing of consents ...the assistant had none of this responsibility ..incredible I thought.!

There is also the possibility that if the two professions were permitted side by side in private practice both sides would benefit from the sharing of knowledge and procedures. In our area, the Central Coast we have some wonderful dental officers who are so helpful and willing to share their knowledge but by the same token if they can see you are doing a good job are very acknowledging of the skills and expertise you may bring in your particular area. I'm sure this would be the case if one was to work alongside a private dentist. All of this of course is good for the patient which we do all care about.

Why has this subordination been allowed to continue one may ask? It appears to me because we are a predominantly female work force and a very small one at that is a major contributing factor .The other reason is that because we are forced to only work for the Public Service we are bound by restrictions to speak to the media so it has just about been impossible to make our plight public knowledge.

One reason I see for some of the above problems is the difficulty people outside the dental profession have in relating to it. I will give two examples. When The Entrance Public School was upgraded the Premier came for the official opening. Despite the fact we had a brand new dental clinic and were situated right next to the hall where the opening was held no visit or acknowledgement by the school or government was evident. People often fall into one of two categories . Either they have perfect teeth and so think dental health is not a issue. Alternatively they have had less than (as they perceive it) happy dental experiences and it is too difficult a issue to deal with for them personally. Last month I attended a orthopaedic surgeon in his rooms. A bright personable chap as you would ever meet, but when it came to disclosing what I did I he literally went cold up the spine and shuddered.! Perhaps you ,dear reader are having a similar reaction!. This emotional response is one reason I see that has meant that outsiders feel uncomfortable about making logical policy decisions in regard to dental policy and it has been left to dental people who often cant” see

the wood for the trees ""

There is no quick fix for the problems now and in the future regarding the dental health of this state. The poor limited status and pay of the therapists needs to be addressed immediately. There are many competent people that have left our dental workforce who may be able to be up skilled if conditions improved. Older workers should be encouraged to continue working. In my individual case I have been denied simple physio treatment for a neck problem due to prolonged dental work. Because I'm not a certain percentage incapacitated I am not deemed eligible. This is ridiculous that I have to pay to have my injury caused by prolonged work massaged so I can continue to work. Neck and back injuries are very common in dental workers and a special category should be permitted through workers compensation.. This illogical decision is exactly the **opposite** to the workers comp own doctor recommendation. Naturally I'm appealing the decision. Many dental workers are lost because of injury and this area needs investigation and common sense remedies applied in all genuine cases. The new Oral Health degree means there will be well trained people able to deliver strong preventive oral health measures which is an integral part of dental health in the future.

The total health of an individual is now more and more being related to their oral health. Therefore any funding spent on prevention and cure before real problems emerge will save many other major health problems which will of course soak up more revenue.

The parents of the young people we treat are very concerned about the future of our service and evidence of this concern will follow this letter.

I sincerely hope that positive responses will occur from the welcome legislative inquiry into NSW Dental Services and as a result the overall access to services in dental health and education of as many as possible NSW citizens will become a reality rather than placed in the "too hard basket " as it appears to be now.

Yours Faithfully,

Margaret Law Reid



Dental Therapist.