

Media Release

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Historic Milestone: First Graduates of Adult Dental Care Programme Set to Transform Access to Oral Health in Aotearoa

NZOHA celebrates the first cohort of oral health therapists and dental therapists trained to deliver adult restorative care.

Te Ohu Pūniho Ora o Aotearoa – New Zealand Oral Health Association (NZOHA) congratulates the first graduating class of the University of Otago’s Postgraduate Certificate in Health Sciences (Adult Restorative Dental Care)—a pivotal step in tackling Aotearoa’s oral health inequities.

This inaugural cohort includes both oral health therapists and dental therapists who have completed advanced clinical training in adult restorative dentistry. Their achievement signals a major opportunity to bridge persistent gaps in dental care—particularly for Māori, Pacific, rural, and low-income populations who have historically struggled to access timely and affordable treatment.

“This programme is a turning point,” says NZOHA President Anna Holyoake. “It enables skilled clinicians—many already embedded in public, rural and community services—to provide much-needed restorative care to adults who have fallen through the cracks of our current system.”

Access to basic dental services for adults in New Zealand remains a significant public health concern. Research shows New Zealand exhibits the highest levels of socioeconomic inequality in untreated dental decay among adults when compared to Australia, Canada, and the United States¹. These disparities are particularly pronounced among Māori, Pacific peoples, and individuals residing in high-deprivation areas. By upskilling oral health therapists and dental therapists to provide basic adult restorative care, this programme directly addresses these inequities, enabling a more equitable distribution of dental services across underserved communities.

NZOHA Vice President and student in this first cohort Samuel Carrington highlights the broader impact of this initiative:

¹ Mejia, G. C., Elani, H. W., Harper, S., Thomson, W. M., Ju, X., Kawachi, I., & Kaufman, J. S. (2018). Socioeconomic status, oral health and dental disease in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. *BMC Oral Health*, 18(1), 176. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12903-018-0630-3>

“This is about more than just upskilling—it's about restoring dignity and equity,” says NZOHA Vice President and programme graduate Samuel Carrington. “We’re bringing essential dental care to places where it’s been missing for too long.”

NZOHA applauds the University of Otago for its leadership in developing this programme and commends the clinicians who undertook this training while continuing to serve their communities. We look forward to seeing the expansion of this initiative and the long-term impact it will have in reducing oral health inequities in Aotearoa.

About NZOHA

Te Ohu Pūniho Ora o Aotearoa – the New Zealand Oral Health Association (NZOHA) represents over 1,000 registered oral health therapists, dental therapists, and dental hygienists working across both the public and private sectors throughout Aotearoa.

Established to support and advocate for these professions, NZOHA promotes their interests, advances their professional standing, and champions their essential role in delivering oral health care.

Our profession has deep roots in New Zealand’s health system—beginning with the establishment of the School Dental Service in 1921, expanding to include dental hygiene in the 1970s, and now encompassing highly trained oral health therapists serving communities across the motu in both Te Whatu Ora and private practice².

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Media contact

Samuel Carrington, NZOHA Vice-President and Oral Health Therapist
M: 021 024 79968

² Please see: <https://www.nzoha.org.nz/the-new-zealand-oral-health-professions-history/>