

## Media Release

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### **COHS struggling due to inadequate pay and lack of recognition**

Te Ohu Pūniho Ora o Aotearoa – The New Zealand Oral Health Association (NZOHA) is the national association which represents oral health therapists, dental therapists and dental hygienists. The Community Oral Health Service (COHS) has our members working at the coalface within community clinics and see tamariki and rangatahi in our clinics turning up in pain.

“A really obvious reason why the COHS is struggling is inadequate pay and lack of recognition for dental and oral health therapists within the service” says Anna Holyoake, NZOHA President. “There is a huge issue of recruitment and retention within the service nationwide. Oral health therapists are faced with coming out of their three-year University professional programme with a Bachelor’s degree and being offered a job within the DHB which pays them 80 cents more than the minimum wage per hour, or go to private practice and earn well over double that per hour. It is a no brainer where they would go really”.

Working in private practice does not mean the working conditions are better either<sup>i</sup>. “Unfortunately, oral health care in Aotearoa New Zealand is still one of the only health services where there is still a requirement for a fee, even in emergency dire situations. Anecdotal evidence from our members shows regardless of working in the public or private sector, there is lack of professional recognition of what exactly oral health therapists can do. How would you like to go to work knowing your boss doesn’t know exactly what skillset you have? These are what our members are faced with daily” says Samuel Carrington, NZOHA Executive Member.

“Our association has been warning DHBs for years about the major pay discrepancy between the public and private sectors and this being one of the main reasons why they were finding it hard to retain oral health therapists. The issues we are seeing today with major wait times nationwide have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but they were around well before then” says Samuel.

“Even within the Allied Health professions, because our members aren’t usually working in hospitals where allied health professionals usually work, there is that disconnect where we are not really seen as allied health.” says Anna.

“The most obvious short-term solution would be to give dental and oral health therapists the pay they are deserved, but we also think dentists should come and work within the community clinics too. Help our members by being at the coalface of this dental epidemic.”.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2022/05/preschooler-forced-to-wait-five-months-for-free-dental-appointment-auckland-parent-says.html>