Learning from the International Experience:
Dental and Oral Health Therapists in Australia

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Sufficiency of the U.S. Oral Health Workforce in the Coming Decade: A Workshop
Short history: Dental Therapy

1913 proposed New Zealand
1914-1921 dental dressers UK
1920 New Zealand: School Dental Nurses - young women
1923, 1946 Aust governments proposed - rejected
1960s adopted internationally (Netherlands, Canada, Asia)

1965 NHMRC recommended
1966 Tasman, South Australia: Dental Therapists
1972 Dental Hygiene training began in SA
1973 Labor govt expanded School DS
1998-2004 Regulation reviews Australia wide
1996 Oral Health Therapist “born”
Child oral health outcomes

- Access to care - early years
  - 90% per 2 years

- Epidemiology
  - Caries free 50+% 
  - Caries rates declined 
  - Participation rates

References: AIHW DSRU studies:
Ellershaw & Spencer 2006; Armfield, Slade & Spencer 2008
Dental therapy practice 1965-2000

- Diagnostic (oral exam & radiology)
- Educative, Preventive
- Clinical treatment- restorative & exo
- Autonomous: referred beyond skills to dentist
- Employment limited to school dental services
- Patients aged 0-18 (at school)
- Not registered- exempted from Acts
- Supervision, direction, control of dentist
Private & public practice

- 2000 onwards
  - Registered for practice
  - Represented on Dental Practice Boards
  - Employment limits removed
  - Recognition of autonomous practice
  - Own practices

- Research findings
  - DTs can provide services to same quality as dentists
  - Many DTs in mixed employment
  - Clear role for DTs in private sector

- Observations
  - Dentists more accepting of roles
  - Stronger team relationships
Numbers and regulation

**Dental therapists**

- 1800
- DT: popn=1:11,765 = 7.5/100,000
- Collaborative & referral relationship with dentist
- Diagnose & treatment planning
- Off site services
- Restorative, Ortho, Preventive, OHP, Radiog, LA
- Patients 0-18 yrs
  - + 18-25 in Vic
- Adults
  - in WA prescr (1973)
  - New enabling legislation NT, Vic & NZ

**Dental hygienists:**

- 1000
- DH: popn= 1:25,154 = 4.3/100,000
- Work on prescription/autonomously
- Diagnose & treatment planning:
  - most off site
  - Perio, Ortho, Preventive, OHP, Radiog, LA
- Patients all ages
Dental Therapists Services
Age range of clients 0-18
Examination, diagnosis, treatment planning
Record signs of periodontal disease
Intra & Extra -oral radiography & radiology:
- Prophylaxis; teeth and restorations;
- Removal plaque & dental calculus;
- Topical applic preventive/therapeutic agents
- Apply/remove rubber dam;
- Admin dental local analgesia;
- Apply fissure sealants;
- Take impressions
- Oral health Ed/ hygiene Instruction
- Oral health promotion
- Splint to stabilise mobile teeth
- Prepare cavities in prim & second teeth
- Restore teeth- amalgam, cement, plastic
- Stainless steel crowns; primary teeth
- Emerg-pulp exposures in secondary teeth;
- Pulpotomies primary & perm teeth;
- Extract primary & permanent teeth
- Replace avulsed teeth

**Orthodontic functions - all ages**
- eg band sizing
  - removal of appliances & archwires
  - placement & removal of archwire fixation
  - Etching & sealing prep for brackets

Dental Hygienists Services
Age range of clients- all ages
Examination, diagnosis, treatment planning
Measure & record periodontal disease
Intra & Extra -oral radiography & radiology
Prophylaxis of teeth & restorations;
Remove plaque & dental calculus;
Topical applic preventive/therapeutic agents
- Apply & removal rubber dam;
- Administer dental local analgesia;
- Apply fissure sealants;
- Take impressions
- Oral H Ed/hygiene instructions
- Oral health promotion
- Splint to stabilize a mobile tooth
- Insert temporary restorations
- Caries susceptibility testing
- Removal of dental cement;
- In surgery bleaching
- Removal of sutures;
- Root debridement (root planing);
- Apply/remove periodontal packs

**Orthodontic functions**
- band sizing
- removal of bands and attachments,
removal of archwire
placement & removal of archwire fixation
What is an oral health therapist

- Dental therapist + Dental hygienist?
- A mini dentist?
- Generic ‘auxiliary’
  - Basis in oral health
  - Generic primary oral health care
    - preventive, health promotion
    - first contact- relationship development, communication
    - assess, treat & refer
    - special skill development- underserved areas
    - complimentary & substitute services

n= 300 in Australia
Oral health therapists - Education

- 8 University Bach.OH programs in Australia - 3 years
  - 7 Oral Health Therapy, 1 B. Dental Hygiene
  - 3 single Diplomas (colleges)

Content:
- Health promotion, public & community health
- Evidence, ethics & profession
- Health sciences
- Oral exam, diagnosis, treatment planning
- Preventive clinical therapies
- Separate Integrated clinical streams in D Th & D Hygiene
- Community clinical practice experience later years
How do they contribute to the oral health team?

- Wellness approach – improve oral health
  - health promoting,
  - preventive, minimal intervention first
- Social and biomedical approaches
- Collaborative - inside and outside oral health
- Focus on less complex treatment services
- Enable lower cost models of care
- Provide care in underserved communities
- Flexible; able to adapt to local needs
Oral health therapists can be used to...

- Improve access to preventive services
- Reduce bottlenecks in access to care
- Provide more cost-effective services
- Provide particular skill sets for particular patient groups - unmet needs
- Create better linkages between private and public services
- Re-orient health services
- Remove silo approaches - increase vertical and horizontal collaborations
What’s happening already?

Dental therapists
- in pediatric specialist and orthodontic practices
- providing treatment services under general anesthesia in hospital clinics
- providing treatment services to physically and mentally disabled (including autistic) children
- providing treatment for adults
- providing treatment for children (pre, primary & youth programs)
- In health promotion units
- in private practices
- in indigenous communities with patients of all ages- family centred care – dentist visits monthly
- working independently and referring to private practices
- in remote Aboriginal communities- dentist available on call
- tendering to provide school dental services
- in specialist dental units in Children’s hospitals
- in hospital cleft lip & palate programs
- with phobic patients
- doing outreach identification and referral for homeless, drug and alcohol dependent people, and providing treatment services
- examining, providing treatment and referring young adults for care

Oral health therapists
- in cancer & HIV wards,
- providing oral cancer screening in public health & general practice
- domiciliary and outreach services for elderly
- employed directly by residential care settings- refer on to private dentists
- in implant practices
- in privately owned independent practices referring to private or public practices
- in public & private practices
- in health promotion units
- seeing people straight from waiting lists in hospital primary care departments- examine, treating and referring

Dental therapists, hygienists and dentists working as part of community dental health centre programs

What else is possible?
Regulation & quality assurance

- Quality of care must be the same in public interest
- Regulatory frameworks common to all dental care providers
  - Accredited education programs
  - Continuing Prof Development & Recency of practice
  - Informed consent, infection control etc
  - Recognition of boundaries & appropriate referral
  - Sanctions for un-professional conduct
  - Professional indemnity insurance
Regulatory debates

- Supervision/ direction/ prescription/ clinical guidance/ collaboration & referral
- Responsibility for care provided
- Lists /according to education
- Protecting title/registration for OHTs
Remove regulatory barriers to the utilization of the full dental team including dentists, dental therapists, dental hygienists, dental prosthodontists, dental technicians, dental assistants and dental specialists …

(Australia’s Oral Health Plan, NACOH 2004)
References

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Hopcraft MS, Morgan MV, Wright FAC, Satur JG Hopcraft MS, Morgan MV, Wright FAC, Satur JG. Dental service provision in Victorian residential aged care facilities.. Aust Dent J 2007


