

New Zealand Report Gives Failing Grades to Children's Oral Health

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A recent report released by the New Zealand Ministry of Health shows that the dental health of the country's children are among the worst in the developed world. The New Zealand government has spent more than \$40 million on the country's "dental problem" since 2007, including the investment of resources in its Dental Therapist program. The statistics have shown little improvement, with 44% of five-year-olds having at least one decayed, missing or filled tooth. By comparison, the figure for England's five-year-olds was 39%, Australia 43% and the U.S. 28%.

In spite of free community oral health services currently available to children up to age 18, the oral health of young New Zealanders is suffering. According to the report, most primary schools have dental clinics, and many regions of the country operate mobile clinics. In extreme cases, toddlers have huge holes in several teeth, and most of the baby teeth have to be extracted, leaving the child helpless to eat, bite, chew or speak correctly. Interestingly, the Pew Report/Kellogg Foundation repeatedly cites the "dental therapist" model as one of the success stories of mid-levels providing oral health care.