

## The value of an oral health therapist in the dental team

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Both disciplines of dental hygiene and dental therapy have been part of the dental team for many decades in some countries. New Zealand introduced the concept of a school dental nurse in 1921, and these nurses became part of a valuable public health system gaining world recognition. This role evolved to be a community dental therapist in decades to come. America introduced the concept of the dental hygienist even earlier than the New Zealand dental therapist, and dental hygienists also gained international credibility.

The science of prevention has developed significantly since the introduction of the dental therapist and hygienist, and the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand have more recently joined the disciplines where dental schools are graduating dual trained oral health therapists having completed a bachelor degree course. The set of skills evident in an oral therapist provides the ability to practice scopes of practice autonomously, and carry a finite set of skills to provide early diagnosis, early treatment with a focus on prevention. These scopes of practice are registered by the relevant regulatory bodies and oral health therapists carry individual certificates to practice this set scope of practice.

America has yet to embrace the concept of an oral health therapist even though evidence shows these groups if utilized correctly, can provide an extremely valuable service to communities, especially those who currently are not accessing oral health care. The concept of patient litigation is gaining momentum, and "Exploring the Possibilities in Shaping the Future of Dentistry" is a very timely event for the American dental fraternity to look more closely at utilizing this model of care.

### Biography

Helen Thane graduated with a Masters Degree in Public Health from the School of Medicine in 2004, University of Otago. During this time she was Head of Discipline for the Dental Therapy Programme 1999 – Dec 2005 and also completed a postgraduate certificate in tertiary teaching, a postgraduate certificate and diploma in public health. Helen progressed New Zealand's first degree for dental therapists to postgraduate diploma level and taught more widely assisting medical and dental students studying public oral health. In 2006 Helen was Programme Leader & Senior Lecturer for the Bachelor in Oral Health at AUT University, until she joined CSU in March 2009 as a lecturer and Head of Discipline.

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