

ABSTRACT

Child Protection in Dental Practice: A Review of Legal and Professional Responsibilities in Aotearoa

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Social and health inequities persist across Aotearoa New Zealand, disproportionately impacting children and families facing systemic disadvantage. Dental practitioners are uniquely positioned to identify early signs of child abuse and neglect due to their regular interactions with children and their whānau. However, many report uncertainty about their legal and professional obligations when responding to child protection concerns, limiting their ability to provide effective support (Han et al., 2022).

This review critically examines the legal statutes and professional standards that inform the role of dental practitioners in child protection (Han et al., 2024). It draws on key legislation, including the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, and professional standards. A narrative analysis revealed that despite the legal and ethical expectations to report concerns and collaborate with child protection services, current professional guidelines lack the clarity necessary to support confident and timely clinical decision-making. Particularly, requirements to inform the child or their family about information sharing are often inconsistently addressed in organisational documents, creating uncertainty for practitioners and potentially interfering with protective actions. The review emphasises the importance of equity-focused, Te Tiriti-informed guidance to promote culturally responsive practice and enhance capacity to respond to child protection concerns. Key recommendations include providing scaffolded professional education, strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration, and developing practical, accessible protocols for both prevention and early intervention, rather than focusing on detection and reporting. Integrating culturally safe and legally sound child protection practices into oral health care is essential to upholding the rights and wellbeing of tamariki and their whānau.

In this presentation, I aim to highlight the critical role of dental practitioners in child protection, explore the legal and ethical frameworks that guide their responsibilities, and propose actionable strategies to strengthen their capacity to respond confidently and culturally safely to concerns of abuse and neglect.

References

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