



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION INC.

## DENTAL HEALTH OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN

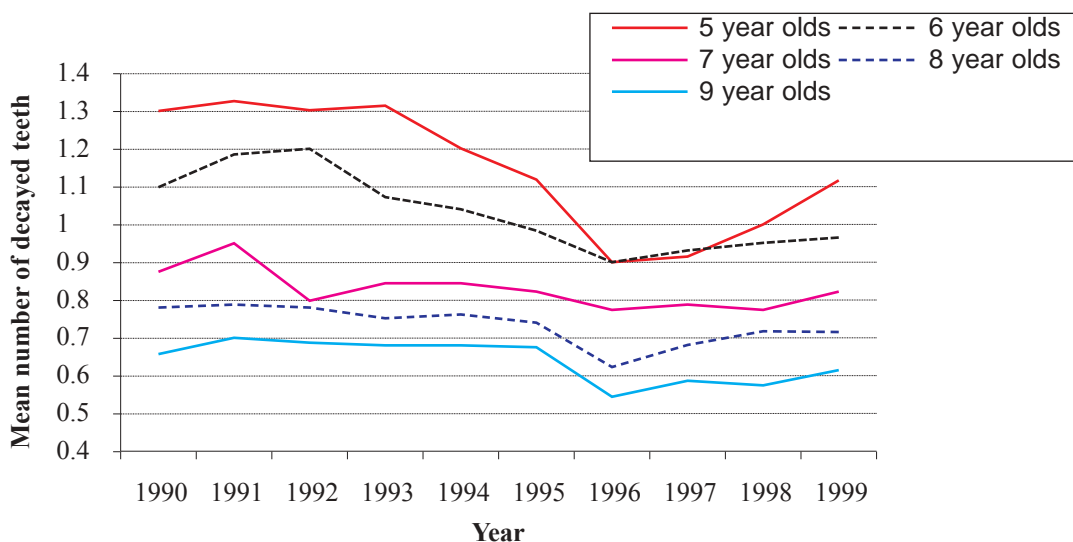
*Australian children have the third best oral health when compared to other OECD countries. But we are second last when it comes to comparison of the oral health of adults. Recent studies of the oral health of children also suggest that tooth decay in children is on the rise.*

Australia has the third lowest incidence of decayed, missing or filled permanent teeth amongst 12 year olds, when compared with other countries.<sup>1</sup> However, the last OECD study identified Australia as having the second worst adult oral health of all the OECD countries. Reports indicate that, whilst there was an overall improvement in the incidence of caries among children through the 1990s, a trend of increasing tooth decay in children in the late 1990s was

evident. Unfortunately, there is no available evidence to establish whether this trend is continuing beyond 1999. This demonstrates the importance of the need for regular National Oral Health Surveys.

A survey of almost 372 000 children found a 21.7 per cent increase in the incidence of decayed teeth between 1996 and 1999 in 5 year old children and it also found that the number of children with no tooth decay was decreasing.

It was also alarming to note that the third highest number of hospital admissions for children aged under four is for dental extraction and restorations.<sup>2</sup> For patients between ages 1-14, 5.2 per cent of hospital admissions were for the same procedures.



**Fig 16. Mean decayed deciduous teeth for 5-9 year old children in Australia from 1990 to 1999**

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Bearing in mind that most dental decay is preventable, it is evident that this increase could have been avoided had proper attention been given to the development of oral health educational programmes.

This information establishes that:

- i) while the dental health of our children is strong, this is potentially in decline; and
- ii) the oral health of Australian adults is poor when compared with other countries.<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that one of the most reliable predictors of poor adult dental health is poor dental health as a child. If we can maintain the strong oral health of our children and prevent it declining as they grow older, evidence suggests that the future dental health of our adult population will correspondingly increase.

During the 1990s it is interesting to note that NSW had the highest incidence of decay in 12 year olds' permanent teeth compared to the other states and territories. In 1996, the NSW School Dental Service introduced a programme known as Save Our Kids Smiles (SOKS), which involved statewide screening of children every two years.<sup>4</sup> It covered children from Kindergarten to year eight. The programme involved education, risk assessment and clinical care. By 1999, the situation had dramatically altered such that NSW had the second lowest incidence of such decay.

This example illustrates the effect that a targeted programme of prevention and education has on dental health. If healthy habits are taught from an

early age and if regular monitoring is carried out to identify health risks before they become major problems, then money can be saved and dental health will increase.

Development of preventive programmes for young Australians including fluoridation of the water supply, education, maintenance of healthy oral hygiene habits, adherence to a healthy diet and regular access to dental services will prevent the overall oral health of Australians declining as they become adults and will assist them maintain the enviable dental health of Australian children into adult life.

Investments in such preventive steps would result in a significant return on investment as considerable savings, being many times the amount invested, would be achieved in the cost of later care.

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1. Armfield JM, Roberts-Thomson KF, Spencer AJ. *The Child Dental Health Survey, Australia 1999: Trends across the 1990s*. AIHW Cat. No. DEN 95. Adelaide: The University of Adelaide (AIHW Dental Statistics and Research Series No. 27), page 49.
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Dental Statistics and Research Unit 2003. *Australian hospital statistics 2001-02*. AIHW Cat. No. HSE 25. Canberra: AIHW (Health Services Series No. 20), Tables 11.15, 11.16.
3. *The Child Dental Health Survey, Australia 1999* found that the number of decayed deciduous teeth in Australian children was increasing by the end of the 1990s, as in Armfield *et al.*, as above, page 27.
4. Armfield *et al.*, as above, page 1.

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