



Australian Government  
 Australian Institute of  
 Health and Welfare

AIHW Dental Statistics  
 and Research Unit  
 Research Report No. 29

## Dental therapist labour force in Australia, 2003



THE UNIVERSITY  
 OF ADELAIDE  
 AUSTRALIA



**T**his report provides information on the dental therapist labour force in Australia based on data from the 2003 national dental labour force collection. The collection was conducted in all states and territories with the exception of the Northern Territory; results for the Northern Territory are based on data from the 2002 collection.

### Practice status

In 2003 there were an estimated 1,560 registered dental therapists in Australia. Of these 71 were also registered as dental hygienists (32 in Victoria, 31 in Western Australia and 8 in South Australia). The majority of registered therapists, 1,236 (79.2%), were practising as a therapist. Of those with dual registration, 7 (0.4%) practitioners reported that they were concurrently working as a dental therapist and as a hygienist, and 36 (2.3%) were solely practising hygiene. There were 163 (10.5%) registered therapists not participating in the labour force (i.e. on leave, overseas, not working). Another 118 (7.5%) were participating in the labour force but not working as dental auxiliaries (Table 1).

**Table 1: Dental therapists, practice status by state/territory, 2003**

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	All
Practising therapy	195	152	354	309	128	61	22	16	1,236
Practising hygiene and therapy	—	1	—	5	—	—	—	—	7
Practising hygiene only in other states	—	26	—	4	6	—	—	—	36
On 3+ months leave	10	11	11	16	9	1	—	—	58
Overseas	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	2	3
Not working	12	17	18	48	2	1	4	—	102
Working in dentistry, but not as dental auxiliary	7	7	18	9	—	—	2	—	45
Working, but not in dentistry	7	14	21	24	2	—	2	2	73
<b>Total</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>417</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>1,560</b>

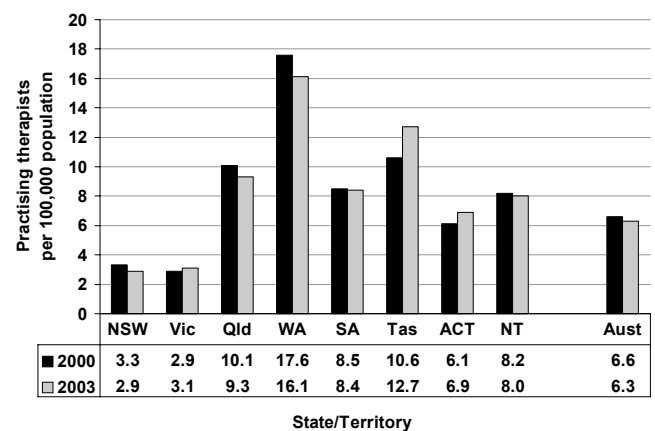
**Notes**

- Not all columns/rows sum to total as weighted data have been rounded to whole numbers.
- There was no NT collection in 2003; results are based on data from the 2002 collection.
- Registration of dental therapists/hygienists in NSW and Qld commenced in 2005.

In the period 2000 to 2003 there was a slight decrease (1.3%) in the number of practising therapists, from 1,260 to 1,243. Some shifts at the state/territory level may be attributed to changes in data collection methods as a consequence of the introduction of formal registration and/or the inclusion of dual registered therapists in certain jurisdictions.

Overall, the number of dental therapists per 100,000 population decreased, from 6.6 in 2000 to 6.3 in 2003. The largest shift in this period occurred in Tasmania, where the number of therapists per 100,000 population increased from 10.6 in 2000 to 12.7 in 2003 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Practising therapists, rate per 100,000 population, state/territory, 2000 and 2003**



**Notes**

- There was no Vic collection in 2000; results were estimated by multiplying the total number registered in 2000 (260) by the 1997 labour force participation rate (53.9% practising therapists).
- There was no NT collection in 2003; results were based on data from the 2002 collection.

### Demographic characteristics

In 2003 only 1.4% of the practising dental therapists were male and the average age of therapists was 40.3 years. The largest percentage of therapists were in the 40–44 years age group (28.7%) and just over a quarter (26.2%) were in the 45–49 years age group. There were 11.1% in the two youngest age groups, 20–24 and 25–29 years (Table 2).

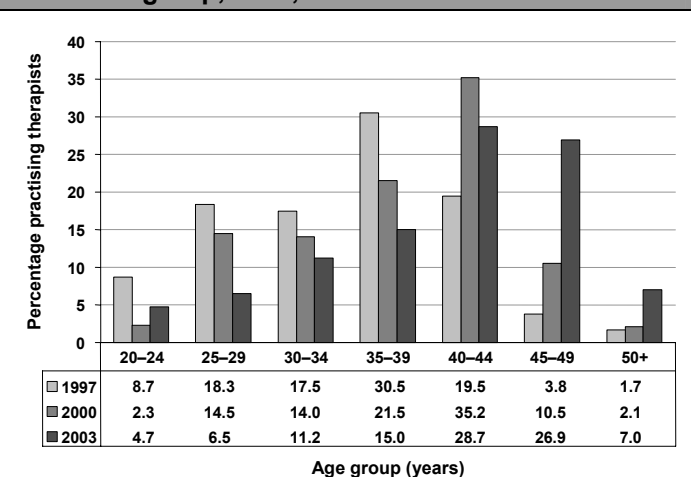
**Table 2: Practising therapists by age group and state/territory, 2003**

Age group	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	All
20–24	12	13	11	9	12	—	—	—	59
25–29	22	16	14	15	8	5	—	2	80
30–34	10	25	44	41	14	6	—	—	139
35–39	32	17	60	40	16	12	9	2	186
40–44	64	35	136	81	20	8	6	6	357
45–49	44	35	80	100	43	19	6	6	334
50+	10	13	9	28	15	11	1	—	87
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1,242</b>
<b>Average age (years)</b>									
	<b>39.4</b>	<b>38.4</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>41.3</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>41.9</b>	<b>42.2</b>	<b>41.6</b>	<b>40.3</b>

**Notes**

1. There was no NT collection in 2003; results are based on data from the 2002 collection.
2. Not all columns/rows sum to total as data have been weighted and rounded to whole numbers.

Since 1997 there has been a shift towards an older age distribution, as indicated by increases in the percentages of therapists in the two oldest age groups, 45–49 years and 50 years or older (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Percentage practising therapists by age group, 1997, 2000 and 2003****Notes**

1. The 2000 distribution does not include Vic.
2. There was no NT collection in 2003; results are based on data from the 2002 collection.

**Practice characteristics**

The majority (72.6%) of practising dental therapists were employed in the school dental service, 10.2% worked in community dental service practices and small percentages were employed in dental hospitals (0.9%) or teaching institutions (3.1%). Overall, 13% of therapists worked in private sector practices with percentages varying widely by state/territory. In Western Australia 39.8% of therapists reported working in the private sector, whereas in

South Australia less than 1% of therapists worked in the private sector (Table 3).

**Table 3: Practising therapists, practice type by state/territory, 2003**

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	All
<b>Public</b>									
School dental service	83	119	330	173	120	51	11	16	902
Community dental clinic	88	15	5	4	1	5	10	—	127
Dental hospital	8	—	—	4	—	—	—	—	12
Teaching Institution	13	4	9	8	6	—	—	—	39
<b>Private</b>									
Clinical practice	3	7	2	80	—	5	—	..	97
Specialist practice	—	8	5	44	—	—	1	..	58
Other	3	—	2	1	1	—	—	..	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1,242</b>

**Notes**

1. Not all columns/rows sum to total as data have been rounded to whole numbers.
2. There was no NT collection in 2003; results are based on data from the 2002 collection.
3. Based on practice type of main practice location.
4. In the NT therapists were not permitted to practise in the private sector.

**Practice activity**

Total hours usually worked per week were summed across all reported practice locations. The largest percentage (43.3%) of therapists worked for 30–39 hours per week followed by those working 20–29 hours per week (21.5%). Only 4% worked less than 10 hours per week. The average hours worked per week was 29.4 hours. More than half (56.3%) of therapists worked part-time (Table 4).

**Table 4: Practising therapists, work hours characteristics by state/territory, 2003**

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	All
<b>Hours per week</b>									
<10	1.3	7.5	0.7	8.6	1.8	5.9	—	—	4.0
10–19	11.5	13.3	18.0	19.3	14.4	5.9	5.6	—	15.3
20–29	26.9	26.7	10.7	23.2	27.1	35.3	33.3	—	21.5
30–39	33.3	46.6	39.3	45.1	54.9	37.3	55.6	100	43.3
40+	26.9	5.8	31.3	3.9	1.8	15.7	5.6	—	15.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Average hours usually worked</b>									
	<b>30.7</b>	<b>27.8</b>	<b>31.8</b>	<b>26.6</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>29.4</b>	<b>30.6</b>	<b>36.8</b>	<b>29.4</b>
<b>Percentage working part-time (&lt;35 hours/week)</b>									
	<b>52.6</b>	<b>65.9</b>	<b>45.3</b>	<b>64.9</b>	<b>64.4</b>	<b>62.7</b>	<b>55.6</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>56.3</b>

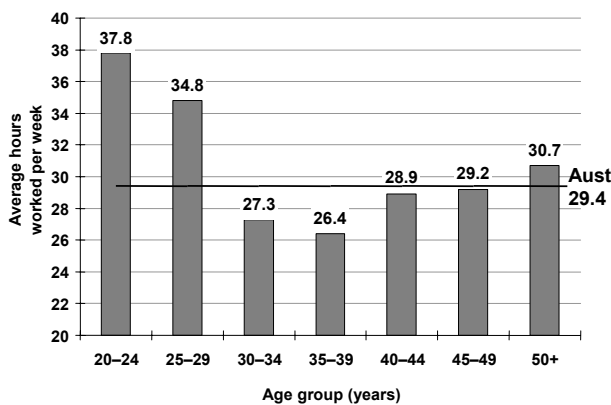
**Notes**

1. Not all columns/rows sum to total as data have been rounded to whole numbers.
2. There was no NT collection in 2003; results are based on data from the 2002 collection.

Average hours usually worked per week varied among age groups. Therapists in the 20–24 years age group had the highest average (37.8 hours per

week) and the 30–34 and 35–39 years age groups had the lowest averages (27.3 and 26.4 hours respectively) (Figure 3).

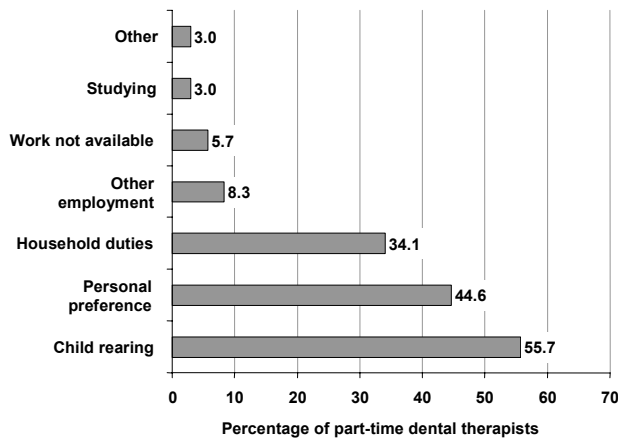
**Figure 3: Average hours usually worked per week by age group, 2003**



Note: There was no NT collection in 2003; results are based on data from the 2002 collection.

Therapists working part-time (less than 35 hours per week) were asked to indicate their major reasons for doing so. The most common reasons given were ‘child rearing’ (55.7%) and ‘personal preference’ (44.6%) followed by ‘household duties’ (34.1%). Only 5.7% cited ‘work not available’ as a reason for working part-time (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Most common reasons for working part-time (less than 35 hours per week), 2003**



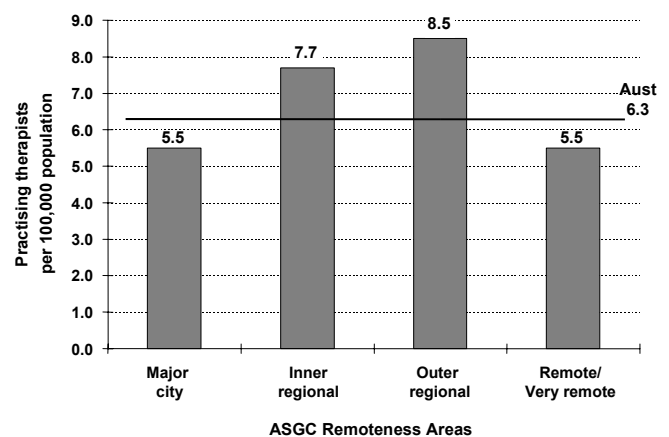
Note: Therapists were asked to cite their reasons for working part-time; multiple responses were given.

Hours dedicated to various areas of practice were totalled for all practice locations reported. The majority of hours worked (79.8%) were dedicated to dental therapy clinical practice, 7.9% was dedicated to administration/management and 4.5% were dedicated to hygiene practice. Only small percentages were dedicated to teaching/research (3.4%), oral health promotion (2.8%), chair-side assistance (1.1%) and ‘other’ areas of practice (0.5%).

## Regional distribution

In comparison to the dentist labour force, dental therapists were distributed relatively evenly across regions defined by remoteness. In 2003 the number of dentists per 100,000 population in ‘Major city’ areas was nearly three times higher than the number in ‘Remote/Very remote’ areas (57.5 and 17.3 dentists respectively per 100,000 population). In contrast, the number of therapists per 100,000 population was the same for both ‘Major city’ and ‘Remote/Very remote’ areas (5.5), and the highest rate occurred in ‘Outer regional’ areas (8.5) (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Practising therapists per 100,000 population by region, 2003**



Notes

- Regions are defined by the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) Remoteness Areas.
- There was no NT collection in 2003; results are based on data from the 2002 collection.

## Future career position

In order to determine potential future wastage or loss from the labour force, therapists were asked to report their ‘most likely’ career position in 12 months time. Only small percentages perceived that they would not be working as a dental therapist in 12 months time, with 2.9% perceiving that they would ‘most likely’ be working in a different profession or industry and 2.6% expecting to not be working (Table 5).

**Table 5: Practising therapists, most likely career position in 12 months time, 2003**

Most likely career position in 12 months time	Per cent
Same career position	79.2
Shift from full-time to part-time	4.7
Shift from part-time to full-time	4.6
Shift from practising therapy to working in a therapy/hygiene position	5.5
Not working / on extended leave	2.6
Working in another profession/industry	2.9
Shift from therapy to hygiene	0.5

Note: There were 46 records excluded due to missing data.

## Data collection

Data were collected from June 2003 through to December 2003. The method of data collection and resulting response rates varied by state/territory and are summarised below (Table 6).

The survey scope was estimated to be 86% of the Australian dental therapist labour force, and of those surveyed an overall response rate of 72.6% was achieved.

State/territory	Surveyed	Mail-out type	Reminder mail-out	Response rate (%)
NSW	ADTA members	Direct mailed	Yes	84.7
Vic	Registered therapists	Surveyed with registration renewal	No	84.3
Qld	ADTA members	Direct mailed	No	52.7
WA	Registered therapists	Direct mailed	Yes	75.1
SA	Registered therapists	Surveyed with registration renewal	No	89.1
Tas	Registered therapists	Surveyed with registration renewal	No	84.1
ACT	Therapists employed with ACT Dental Services	Direct mailed	Yes	80.6
NT (2002)	Registered therapists	Surveyed with registration renewal	No	63.2

**Notes**

1. There was no NT collection in 2003; results are based on data from the 2002 collection.
2. Follow-up mail-out consisted of one reminder mailing of survey questionnaire approximately 4 weeks after initial mail-out.
3. Registration of dental therapists/hygienists in NSW and Qld commenced in 2005.

It was assumed that non-respondents and those not in the survey scope had the same characteristics as respondents; hence, data were weighted up to the total number of therapists registered, or the total number employed by public dental services in that state/territory. There may be some overestimation of numbers practising if non-respondents were more likely to be those not working as a dental therapist.

The questionnaire asked about demographic characteristics, practice status, practice characteristics at up to three locations and hours worked.

## Summary

- In 2003 there were 6.3 practising therapists per 100,000 population.
- The average age of therapists was 40.3 years.
- The majority (72.6%) of practising therapists were employed in the school dental service.
- On average, therapists worked 29.4 hours per week. Average hours worked varied by age

group, and the 20–24 years age group had the highest average (37.8 hours).

- More than half (56.3%) of therapists worked part-time (less than 35 hours per week).
- The majority (79.8%) of the hours worked were dedicated to therapy clinical practice.
- The numbers practising per 100,000 population varied only moderately by region, with the highest rate (8.5) occurring in 'Outer regional' areas and the lowest in 'Major city' and 'Remote/Very remote' areas (5.5).
- Only a small percentage (4.5%) expected that they would not be practising as a dental therapist in 12 months time.

## Acknowledgements

The assistance of the Australian Dental Therapy Association (ADTA) and the ACT Dental Services with distribution of the 2003 questionnaires was greatly appreciated. The support of the responding dental therapists is also acknowledged.

### Additional data sources

Teusner DN, Spencer AJ 2003. Dental labour force, Australia 2000. Canberra: AIHW (Dental Statistics and Research Series no. 28; 93 pp). [DEN 116]

Australian Bureau of Statistics 30/6/2003. Population estimates by age and sex, Australia, 2003, data cube: SuperTable, Cat. no. 3235.0.55.001, viewed 5 April 2005, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookupresponses/0fd1dba19a26a956ca256ec2007ea1d7?opendocument>>.

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AIHW Catalogue No. DEN 155  
ISSN 1445-7441 (Print) ISSN 1445-775X (Online)

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*The AIHW Dental Statistics and Research Unit (DSRU) is a collaborating unit of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, established in 1988 at The University of Adelaide and located in the Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health (ARCPHO), School of Dentistry, The University of Adelaide. DSRU aims to improve the oral health of Australians through the collection, analysis and reporting of information on oral health and access to dental care, the practice of dentistry and the dental labour force in Australia.*

#### **Published by:**

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