Oral Health

The window to your body's health

“I really liked the science behind things, and discovering how pathology occurs and how products help protect against further destruction. I equally enjoyed the clinical aspect as there are certain things textbooks just can’t teach you... It isn’t until you’ve had that hands-on experience do you start to become a better clinician.”

Ashlea Mulligan
BCh Graduate

Oral Health affects everyone everyday – and normally most people don’t think about it. Good oral health allows you to speak, smile, kiss, smell, taste and chew with self-assurance.

The University of Otago’s Bachelor of Oral Health is an exciting three-year degree programme at New Zealand’s only School of Dentistry, delivering excellent and innovative education in oral health.
Who is an Oral Health professional?

An oral health professional forms an important part of the oral health team. Oral health professionals have skills in dental hygiene, dental therapy, and oral health promotion.

Dental hygienists educate patients about the health of their mouths and provide options for improving and maintaining oral health. Dental hygienists work closely with dentists in detecting and treating oral disease and in preparing mouths for complex restorative care.

A dental therapist is a highly-skilled professional member of the oral health team who provides quality dental care to various sections of the community, particularly preschoolers and children. Early detection of dental disease and preventive treatment is a key aspect of the work of a dental therapist.

An oral health professional can be registered to practise as a dental hygienist or as a dental therapist or both. Both disciplines are skilled at promoting healthy lifestyles and have a strong awareness of the socio-cultural influences on health.

Why study Oral Health?

Good oral health is the key to living life comfortably and thereby impacts on people’s daily lives. As an oral health professional you become part of the dental team, developing the skills to provide dental and periodontal care and to foster lifelong positive oral health attitudes and behaviour in patients. You will also obtain skills in health promotion. The qualification that you will graduate with will provide you with a variety of work opportunities.

Background required

In order to study oral health you need to have attained a satisfactory standard in NCEA Level 3 Biology and English or approved equivalents. You will also need to like and care for people, as well as be reasonably fit and healthy.

Careers in Oral Health

Graduates will meet the requirements for registration as either a dental hygienist or a dental therapist, or both. Graduates will be able to apply knowledge about health and disease to health promotion in education, community development, and public policy.

There is a demand for Oral Health graduates. Employment opportunities include working in private dental practices, orthodontic practices, community-based clinics, and hospital dental clinics.

Postgraduate study and research opportunities include Master of Health Sciences (MHealthSc), Master of Public Health (MPH), and PhD degrees.

What will I study?

The University of Otago’s Bachelor of Oral Health is an exciting three-year degree at New Zealand’s only School of Dentistry. The programme delivers excellent and innovative education in oral health.

Oral health students work in a team with undergraduate and postgraduate dental and dental technology students. This is made possible because the programme is delivered from within the School of Dentistry.

From the beginning of their study oral health students work as part of an oral health team. They also have constant access to highly qualified specialist staff. Graduates will be leaders in the field, because the programme ensures its teaching and research are continually refined and improved to keep in step with oral health best-practice. The programme also focuses on enabling the students to be well prepared for lifelong, self-directed learning.

In the first year of the oral health degree students learn how the body works, particularly how oral tissues interact with their environment. Students will learn the most effective use of computers in the study and practice of oral health, and will complete a paper in Māori Society. Clinical practice begins in the first year as well. Initially students develop clinical skills on models and phantom heads.

The second year introduces pathology, pharmacology, and medicine relevant to oral health. Students will also study a paper in Sociology and in Health Promotion. A large part of the year is spent developing clinical skills in dental hygiene and dental therapy by treating patients under supervision.

The third (final) year concentrates on further clinical training, community oral health, and oral health promotion. Students also undertake a research project.

Admission to the programme

Entry is competitive. To be admitted to the programme applicants must be eligible to attend university and should have attained a satisfactory standard in NCEA Level 3 Biology and English or a recognised equivalent. Online applications can be made to the Health Sciences Admissions Office website from early August, and close on 15 September of the year preceding enrolment. Late applications may be considered.

How do I apply for admission?

Application information for admission into the Bachelor of Oral Health (BOH) is available online at otago.ac.nz/healthsciences

Profile

Marija Lovric

Marija Lovric began her career as a dental assistant – but when she saw “how amazing patients felt after receiving treatment and becoming healthy,” she thought “I wanna do that!”

After enrolling in the Faculty of Dentistry’s Bachelor of Oral Health programme, Marija found her studies to be both hard work and very rewarding.

“You get to learn from some amazing people who are always happy to help. Also we had some amazing, supportive tutors who went out of their way to make sure that everyone was on the track,” she says.

Marija speaks fondly of the hands-on clinical experience that is an integral part of the programme.

“From simulation clinics to patient clinics, there was never a dull moment,” she says. “Each patient is different and unique... our challenge was to create a treatment plan that met not only their dental needs but also their needs as a person – this was the thing I enjoyed the most.”

During her studies, Marija also had the opportunity to undertake a Matched Summer Student Scholarship, which gave her the chance to undertake dental research during her summer break.

“That made me even more passionate about my career, and also gave me a better understanding of the microbiology side of oral health and what it means to follow evidence-based practice,” she explains.

Now working as a dental hygienist in private practice and as a dental therapist for the Hutt Valley District Health Board, Marija says her Otago training has equipped her well for these two roles.

“At Otago we were exposed to many different dental environments - which makes Otago graduates adaptable and employable.”

For questions about Oral Health

otago.ac.nz/oralhealth