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## "A Different Light"

### **A Different Light – 19 November 2022 – “ Time for Government to put money where mouths are ”**

If you don't see them regularly it will bite you in the butt and kick you in the teeth. It will also bite your bank balance. The Dentist. It's not a visit you relish but the longer you leave the worst it will be.

The poor state of dental health in New Zealand has been highlighted in a new report *Tooth be told* commissioned by the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists. "In 2020 well over 40% of adults were estimated to have an unmet need for dental care due to cost. Among Māori and Pasifika adults the figure is more than 50%", the report says. Disabled people also had a high representation in this statistic, but as usual the data on disability is scarce. The report calls for dental services to be Government funded but at the moment the Government has said yeah, nah.

My personal experience with the dentist has been somewhat harrowed. Apparently, people with Cerebral Palsy tend to have worse oral health than most. This is due to a variety of factors that range from not being able to handle a toothbrush or floss, to reflux to taking medication that is not good for teeth. One of my big issues when going to a dentist is not being able to keep still. I have a particular memory of going to the dental nurse when I was eight years old. I needed a local anaesthetic for a filling and did my usual trick when I am told to keep still -which is to not keep still-, which resulted in jerking my head and gum right into the needle. Since then I have done my best to avoid injections in my mouth, instead enduring the pain of the drill. In the 80's when we lived in Auckland the People Centre, which was run by the Beneficiaries Union provided an extremely cheap dental service. I went along, even though I had heard stories of their resident dentist, who was an elder man from Russia. People told me stories of him sweating and shaking and swearing as he extracted teeth. I went to my appointment with extreme trepidation. I was however, most pleasantly

surprised. The Russian dentist turned out to have worked in a Russian hospital and specialised in providing dental care for people with Cerebral Palsy. He was deft at anticipating my involuntary movements and was very understanding and gracious.

I am not the world's greatest tooth brusher, so I try and get my teeth regularly scaled which is a somewhat toe-curling procedure when they use that buzzing spike to descale your teeth. When writing this I realise that I haven't actually been in 2 years. Note to oneself, make an appointment.

A friend went for an assessment at her dentist a while ago. Last week she remembered she had a follow up appointment. Apparently, she innocently hopped into the dental chair and the dentist announced that he would be extracting two teeth. "WHAT?", she exclaimed. "Yes we discussed this remember?" he replied. "Whereabouts" she asked, silently panicking that they might be in the front of her mouth and quickly imagining scenarios in which she could hide her mouth, facemasks, a burka, Zoom. Luckily, they were in the back. After a week and a half of a soft food diet and an eye watering bill she has recovered.

As frightening as they can be, just be glad if you can afford to access these services. As the report pointed out, a lot of people simply can't afford the dentist, or get an appointment. I don't know why our health system treats oral health differently to all the other services that are heavily subsidised or free. I think it is time for the Government to put money where the mouths are.

*Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.*