



*communities where whānau are housed, connected,
valued and thriving*

Lives and smiles transformed at the DCM Dental Service

DCM's emergency dental service has been operating since March 2016 – and is the only dental service of its kind outside of hospital emergency departments in New Zealand. Over 800 individuals have had their lives and smiles transformed thanks to the expertise of DCM's volunteer dentists, led by Dr. Sophie McKenna, our lead dentist.



Volunteer dentist Dr. Sophie McKenna leads DCM's Dental Service. (Source: 1News.)

Sophie's father was a dentist, and she worked with him as a dental assistant during the school holidays. By the age of 17, she had decided that dentistry was a good path for her. Marrying Andrew, a fellow dentist, and working in different practices in the Wellington area, the two were able to share work and parenting responsibilities.

Sophie first heard about DCM at a New Zealand Dental Association branch meeting, putting her name forward as a volunteer.

"DCM was a surprise to me," says Sophie. "I didn't expect to receive so much pleasure from helping the whānau with their dental care.

"When I first began volunteering, our son was dealing with significant health challenges, and I was at a low point. To come into DCM and see good people working hard to improve themselves from their very low points, with the support of DCM staff, was humbling and put my own woes into perspective."

Sophie explains that many of the people coming to DCM's Dental Service need fillings, periodontal work, and extractions. "They often come to us with broken and missing teeth. When you are experiencing homelessness, living from crisis to crisis, oral health care may fall lower on the priority list, especially due to the expense.

“But the big key to DCM’s success is not that treatment is free – but that DCM makes marginalised people feel so welcome when they come here. They don’t feel judged – and that includes when they sit in our dental chair.”



Sophie treats Ngata during an emergency dental session at DCM. (Source: 1News.)

“I’ll say, ‘what’s the most important thing that I can help you with today?’ And they look astonished,” says Sophie. “They are normally told to lie back, open up, and then a health professional gives them a carefully worded lecture about what isn’t being done, how disastrous things are. “And that’s not we’re here for. We’re here to make them feel better.”

We know that poor oral health has been linked to gingivitis, oral infection, heart disease and strokes. But additionally, aesthetic issues can affect your ability to eat and speak – with a huge cost to your self-esteem.

DCM Manahautū (Director) Stephen Turnock says that most of the people DCM works with have missing or decayed teeth, and the feelings of shame around this can take a toll. “When someone is continually looking at the ground, and not wanting to smile or feeling whakamā, then that creates more barriers.”

This is why in 2023, we have begun creating dental impressions (diagnostic models or moulds) on-site at DCM and fitting whānau with partial plates – often of upper teeth.

Sophie has been joined in this initiative by her husband, Andrew, who is no longer able to practice dentistry on his own due to an injury. Still wanting to support DCM, Andrew is able to assist Sophie in various ways.

Sophie shares how life-changing their work has already been.



Toko before and after.

Toko was someone with missing incisors – the most visible teeth in the upper mouth. Sophie and Andrew created a mould and fitted him with replacement teeth.

“Toko was exceptionally happy with the partial plate, and his ‘after’ smile filled the room!” says Sophie.

Another person whose smile has been transformed is Lisa. Lisa has experienced homelessness, including rough sleeping, before she was housed through DCM’s Aro Mai Housing First service. From there, she was able to focus on her wellbeing, including her oral healthcare.



Lisa before and after.

Sophie had to encourage Lisa to do a ‘before’ photo while smiling so we could compare the results. “Now she can’t stop smiling!” Sophie says.

When DCM first met Simon, he had little to smile about. DCM Outreach workers Ngaire and Hazel approached him on the street in Kilbirnie, where he says he was at his lowest ebb.

“DCM saved my life, literally” Simon explains. “If there’s a God, it was great timing on all fronts.”

Simon also survived the Loafers Lodge fire. On the tragic night, he knocked on people’s doors, urging them to evacuate, while managing to escape with his phone and wallet, and the clothes on his back.

After a move into transitional housing, Simon was able to concentrate on other pressing matters, including agonising dental pain. He popped into DCM one day, and met Ali Janes, who coordinates our dental clinic. Ali got Simon in to see Sophie and Andrew, who extracted the problem teeth.

“You could really see the difference it had made for him, which was awesome,” says Ali. “He left pain free and basically floated out of here!”

Simon was left with very few teeth, but Sophie and Andrew supported him through the life-changing process of getting a full denture.

“I’m still learning to smile properly, which is something I haven’t done for a long time,” Simon explains. “But – I can almost look in the mirror again.”

“When I needed DCM the most, you guys have always been there. Now I’m trying to pay it forward.”



Simon popped into DCM to show us his new smile.

DCM’s new initiative creating replacement teeth for whānau has been supported by a \$5,000 community grant from the New Zealand Dental Association.

“My vision for DCM’s Dental Service is that we are able to expand our services a little,” says Sophie. “Ideally, we would like to offer more opportunities to replace teeth that have previously been extracted, as we’ve been doing with the grant this year.”

“Currently, relief of pain is great, but what can we do to support our lovely people and lift them up even more? It is obvious from the beaming smiles of Toko, Lisa and others that restoring their smile boosts their sense of worth. Society inadvertently judges those with missing teeth.

“When someone’s smile is restored and they feel and look good, they project a confidence and positivity that is difficult to measure. It is infused in their posture, their willingness to engage with others – and we see that their approach to issues that challenge them is altered for the better.

“It’s a no-brainer to try to help with this more.”



We mihi to Sophie and Andrew McKenna for their passion and professional expertise as they help to transform the lives and smiles of our whānau.

Can you help support DCM’s Dental Service?

DCM is grateful to all those dentists who, like Sophie and Andrew, give their time to allow us to provide emergency dental care to the most marginalised people in Wellington. We would also like to thank the NZDA for their community grant, the St. John’s in the City Carter Fund for a grant toward a new dental chair for our service, and the Bowen Hospital Trust for their on-going support.

But DCM’s Dental Service is primarily funded by YOU, the people of Wellington. If you would like to support the most marginalised people in our city – like Toko, Lisa, and Simon – please click below.

Or, if you know a dentist or dental assistant who would like to learn more about working at the DCM Dental Service, we would love to hear from them!

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