

Public Health Dentist interview questions

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What to expect

Public health dentist interviews usually combine clinical governance, community health and operational questions. Employers look for AHPRA registration, a calm approach to public patients and evidence you can work across clinical and programmatic roles.

- **Clinical and technical:** Questions about treatment planning, infection control, sterilisation and use of practice software such as Dentally or EXACT.
- **Behavioural:** Questions asking for examples of managing complex patients, supervising staff or handling a difficult clinical situation.
- **Scenario or case:** A public health scenario where you explain how you would prioritise care, design a prevention program or respond to a community need.
- **Policy and collaboration:** Questions about working with health agencies, understanding the Child Dental Benefits Schedule or contributing to oral health policy.
- **Safety and quality:** Questions on NSQHS Standards, infection control and patient safety in a public clinic.

Interviews often start with a phone screen covering registration and availability, followed by a panel interview with a clinical lead, a community health manager and sometimes a consumer representative. The panel may include a written scenario or a short case discussion, and you may be asked to walk through your clinical reasoning. A tour of the clinic or a meet and greet with the dental team can follow.

1. Tell me about a time you managed a patient with complex oral health needs in a public clinic setting.

Why they ask

This tests your clinical judgement and your ability to work within public dental resources.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: describe the patient situation, your assessment, the treatment or referral plan, and the outcome for the patient.

Example answer

"A patient presented with severe dental pain and multiple missing teeth, but also had anxiety and limited English. I took a full history, used a translator, and explained each step before treatment. I provided emergency care, then coordinated a care plan with an oral health therapist and a social worker for transport support. The patient completed their treatment over four visits and reported no further pain, and they kept their follow-up appointments."

2. How would you approach developing an oral health promotion program for a local school or community group?

Why they ask

This assesses your program design and community engagement skills, which are central to public health dentistry.

How to structure your answer

Walk through a planning cycle: needs assessment, aims and audience, partnerships, delivery, evaluation.

Example answer

"First I would meet with the school or community group to understand their needs and existing routines. I would check local oral health data and speak with parents or carers about barriers like cost or transport. Then I would design a program with sessions on brushing, diet and accessing public dental care. I would partner with teachers or community health workers to deliver it, and use simple before and after checks on knowledge and attendance. Finally I would report findings and adjust the program for the next term."

3. Describe your experience with infection control and sterilisation in a public dental clinic.

Why they ask

Public clinics must meet strict standards, and interviewers want to know you follow them consistently under pressure.

How to structure your answer

Use a technical walk-through: state the standards, describe your routine, and give an example of compliance.

Example answer

"I follow the Dental Board of Australia guidelines and the clinic's infection control manual. In my current clinic, I use a documented reprocessing cycle for instruments, including ultrasonic cleaning, inspection and autoclave cycles with daily validation. I also complete hand hygiene and PPE audits. For example, when we had a spike in patient numbers, I made sure no step was rushed and we still passed our internal audit. I keep up with changes by completing annual infection control training."

4. How do you prioritise care when demand exceeds capacity in a public dental setting?

Why they ask

This is a judgement and process question about managing waiting lists and clinical risk fairly.

How to structure your answer

Explain your triage framework, how you communicate with patients, and how you escalate.

Example answer

"I use a triage approach based on clinical urgency, pain, infection risk and vulnerability. I separate urgent care from routine care and make sure patients with active infection or trauma are seen first. I communicate clearly with patients about wait times and offer preventive advice while they wait. I also work with the clinic manager to review lists regularly and escalate any gaps to the health service. In my current role this reduced wait times from six weeks to three for urgent cases."

5. Give an example of how you have supervised or supported dental therapists, hygienists or students.

Why they ask

Public health dentists often lead teams, so employers need evidence you can develop others.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: set the supervision context, describe the support you gave, and give the result for the team or patient.

Example answer

"I supervised two dental therapists and a hygiene student in a four-chair clinic. I set up a weekly case review where we discussed complex patients and treatment options. I also observed their clinical work and gave feedback on infection control and patient communication. The therapists gained confidence in managing anxious patients, and the student completed their placement successfully. The clinic also improved appointment efficiency because we planned care more carefully together."

6. What steps would you take to collaborate with health agencies on an oral health policy issue?

Why they ask

This tests your ability to work beyond the chair and influence system-level change.

How to structure your answer

Use a process answer: identify the issue, map stakeholders, gather evidence, propose action, and review.

Example answer

"I would start by defining the policy issue, for example access to public dental care for a specific group. Then I would map the relevant agencies, such as the local public health unit, Aboriginal community controlled health organisation and hospital network. I would gather data from our clinic and from community feedback, using tools like SPSS to analyse trends. I would propose a joint action plan and schedule regular meetings. After implementation I would review the outcomes and report back to the agencies and the community."