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Brushing Up: Why School Nurses are a Vital Link in Children's Oral Health

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I still remember a conversation I had with a parent during my time in practice as a Specialist Community Public Health Nurse (SCPHN) in School Nursing, over a decade ago. We were meeting about her child's bedwetting at an enuresis clinic when, almost in passing, she mentioned that he had also been complaining of toothache for weeks. She hadn't managed to register him with a dentist and wasn't sure where to turn. The dental pain wasn't why she'd come to see me, but it was clearly what was worrying her most. Encounters like this were common, families trusted School Nurses with worries that might not surface elsewhere.

It is one of many SCPHN School Nurse memories that have stayed with me throughout my career. Since moving into safeguarding and child protection, and now into academia, I've seen the similar stories reflected in research, policy and student learning. Oral health concerns often appear at the edges of case discussions or safeguarding reviews, reminding us that dental decay is rarely just about teeth, it's about inequality, access and opportunity.

This is the reality of SCPHN School Nursing in the UK. We are not working within a medical model, nor school or clinic-based, but are public health practitioners who use population approaches to promote health, prevent illness and tackle inequalities. Oral health is one of the clearest examples of why that matters. Tooth decay is still the leading cause of hospital admissions for children aged 5–9 (RCS England, 2025; N8 Research Partnership, 2024). In 2024, 22.4% of 5-year-olds in England had visible decay, rising to nearly a third in the most deprived communities (OHID, 2025; Nuffield Trust, 2024). Behind these figures are preventable pain, missed schooling and widening inequalities.

The Hidden Public Health Workforce in Plain Sight

School Nurses are sometimes described as a "hidden workforce" because their work doesn't always happen in the spotlight, much of it takes place through school drop-ins, health reviews, home visits and multi-agency meetings. Their practice is grounded in the public health model, focusing on population health and the wider determinants such as housing, poverty, diet and education (NMC, 2022; DHSC, 2021).

Yet their impact is woven into children's everyday lives. That might mean making a timely referral, sitting with a child to explain why brushing matters or linking oral health to topics they already understand, like healthy eating (DHSC, 2021). Because they are trusted professionals embedded in communities, families often share concerns with School Nurses that might otherwise go unnoticed until they become crises (Local Government Association, 2022).

Small Actions, Big Impact

Here's what SCPHN School Nursing practice looks like in relation to oral health:

- Noticing signs of dental neglect during safeguarding health assessments and coordinating follow-up (NMC, 2022)
- Embedding oral health messages within PSHE and wider wellbeing campaigns (Local Government Association, 2022)

- Supporting supervised brushing and fluoride varnish schemes in early years and school settings (OHID, 2025; UK Government, 2025)
- Helping families overcome access barriers, from lack of transport to fear of stigma (Faculty of Public Health, 2024)
- Collaborating with dental teams and multi-agency partners to plan targeted health interventions (Anyikwa and Ogwo, 2025)

Individually, these may seem like small contributions. But together, and at population scale, they shift the dial. Evidence shows integrated school- and community-based programmes, when supported by School Nurses, lead to measurable reductions in decay and better engagement with dental services (PHE, 2017).

Oral Health as a Marker of Inequality

Oral health is shaped by much more than brushing habits. It reflects the social gradient of health: families in temporary housing, children relying on cheap processed food, parents juggling insecure work, all face higher risks of untreated decay (BDA, 2023; Faculty of Public Health, 2024). That's why oral health is such a sensitive marker of broader child wellbeing.

SCPHN School Nurses are trained to recognise these patterns. They don't look at teeth in isolation, they look at the child in context. Oral health promotion is therefore woven into wider public health strategies, from tackling obesity to improving attendance and safeguarding children at risk (DHSC, 2021).

Breaking Down the Silos

Policy is increasingly supportive of prevention and integration (OHID, 2025; Faculty of Public Health, 2024). But School Nurses are still too often absent from the most important commissioning conversations. The government's plan to roll out supervised toothbrushing to 600,000 children (UK Government, 2025) is welcome, but its success depends on connecting it to existing public health infrastructure, including the SCPHN School Nursing workforce.

Imagine if every local oral health strategy explicitly included SCPHN School Nurses as partners in both design and delivery. Their population health expertise and their daily insights into family life could make prevention programmes not only more effective, but more equitable.

The Bottom Line

Looking back, that conversation with the parent whose child was in pain at an enuresis clinic was one of a few that really shaped my understanding of the vital role SCPHN School Nurses play. And today, as an academic working with future SCPHN practitioners, I see how important it is to equip them with the skills, confidence and recognition to keep oral health on the public health agenda.

If we want to reduce inequalities and stop preventable dental disease from dominating hospital admissions, we need to bring oral health out of its silo and make it a core part of child public health work. School Nurses are already in place, already trusted and already making an impact.

So, when you think about children's oral health, don't just picture the dental chair. Picture the drop-in, the safeguarding health review, the health promotion session, even the enuresis clinic- and the SCPHN School Nurse helping to connect the dots between prevention, practice and policy.

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