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**AN INVESTIGATION OF OCCUPATIONAL
STRESS IN NEW ZEALAND DENTISTS**

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Abstract

The present study sought to identify the occupational stressors as well as the resultant psychological and physical stress outcomes for New Zealand dentists. Additionally, the direct and moderating effects of coping were explored in relation to the identified stress outcomes. To achieve this, quantitative data was collected in the form of self-report questionnaires, these being the Occupational Stress Inventory, the Suicide Probability Scale and the Dental Satisfaction Survey. A random, nationwide sample of 500 New Zealand dentists were sent these questionnaires, with 210 dentists returning completed questionnaires. The present study also sought to overcome recent criticisms of the methodology frequently used in stress research. As such, qualitative data was collected through interviews with twelve New Zealand general dentists in the Manawatu region. The interview questions were designed to elicit the job-specific stressors of dentistry in New Zealand as well as the coping responses of New Zealand dentists. Discussion with the New Zealand Dental Association confirmed that the quantitative sample in the present study is representative of the general New Zealand population. However, the representativeness of the qualitative sample could not be established due to the small sample size. The results of the present study showed that there was a consistent positive relationship between coping and job satisfaction, and a consistent negative relationship for coping and strain, and coping and suicide probability. Additionally, coping was found to be a moderator in the stressor-stress relationship, with dentists high in coping experiencing less distress (than dentists low in coping) in conditions of both high and low stress. Sex differences were found to be significant for the role overload stressor, with female

dentists reporting on average significantly higher levels of role overload. Significant group differences were also found between self-employed and employee dentists, with employee dentists experiencing significantly greater levels of physical environment stress as well as strain. Overall, low to moderate levels of stressors, coping, suicide probability, job satisfaction and physical/psychological distress were reported, indicating that New Zealand dentistry may not be any more stressful than other occupations in New Zealand. In terms of methodology, the present study indicates that the Occupational Stress Inventory, being a general stress self-report questionnaire, does not measure job-specific stressors. Therefore, it is suggested that future research utilises questionnaires that have been designed to measure specific occupational stressors as well as the frequency and the intensity of these stressors.

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