



**ORAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA
2026 NATIONAL CONGRESS
OPENING ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
WREST POINT, SANDY BAY, FRIDAY 16 OCTOBER 2026**

Good morning, everyone, and a very warm welcome to Nipaluna Hobart.

I begin by acknowledging the Palawa people, the First Peoples of lutruwita/Tasmania, and the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today.

For countless generations, they have cared for this island, its landscapes, waterways and communities. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to any Aboriginal people with us today. Your continuing contribution to the cultural, social and spiritual life of our State is deeply valued.

It is a genuine pleasure to welcome you to Tasmania.

Whether you have travelled from across the State, from the mainland, New Zealand or further across the Asia-Pacific, I hope you have already experienced some of the particular warmth of this island.

I will admit, the weather does not always live up to our reputation for warmth, but the welcome certainly does.

I would like to thank the Oral Health Association of Australia and the organising committee for bringing this Congress to Tasmania ... and there is a

very good reason to be here. This year marks sixty years of dental therapy and thirty years of oral health therapy in Australia.

Tasmania has a special place in that story. It is where dental therapy education began in Australia, and that is something we can be very proud of.

At its heart was a simple but powerful idea: that good oral health should be accessible to every child and every community.

Sixty years later, that principle remains at the heart of your profession. I began my working life as a nurse and have spent much of my career in health. I understand what it means to care for people, often when they are at their most vulnerable, and often with more compassion than the system gives you time for.

I also know that the contribution of oral health professionals has not always received the recognition it deserves. Oral health is not separate from health. It is health. It affects how we eat, speak, sleep and smile, and how we feel about ourselves. It is connected to chronic disease, diabetes, pregnancy, ageing and our overall quality of life.

And importantly, oral health is about much more than treating a tooth. It is about prevention. It is about education. It is about building confidence and trust. It is about helping people establish healthy habits early in life and supporting them throughout the different stages of life.

It is also about making sure that access to good oral health care is not determined by a person's circumstances.

Here in Tasmania, we see that challenge clearly.

In the 2022 Tasmanian Population Health Survey, almost one in four Tasmanian adults, 23 per cent, rated their oral health as fair or poor. For people living in the most disadvantaged areas, that figure rose to 30 per cent.

But behind every percentage is a person.

A child in pain. A parent struggling to afford treatment. An older Tasmanian whose oral health is affecting their ability to eat, enjoy life and it would indeed not be overly dramatic to say affecting their longevity. A person who has avoided care because of anxiety, cost or previous experiences with the health system.

That is why equity in oral health matters.

I have come to understand the importance of accessible health care even more deeply through my time with the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Tasmania. Through the RFDS, I have seen the difference that access to dental and oral health services can make to individuals, families and entire communities.

And I have seen that impact extend well beyond the consultation room. I remember one man whose oral health had affected far more than his physical wellbeing. After receiving the care he needed, he told us that, for the first time in a long time, he felt confident enough to smile at his children again. It was a simple moment, but a powerful reminder that the impact of health care is not always measured in clinical outcomes alone. It can be measured in confidence, connection and the ability to participate fully in family and community life.

Oral health services have the capacity to make a profound difference. Sometimes, a service may prevent a child from experiencing pain. Sometimes, it may restore someone's ability to eat comfortably. And

sometimes, it may give someone the confidence to smile at their children again.

These moments may seem small, but they can have a lasting impact on a person's wellbeing, dignity and quality of life.

And that is what makes the work represented in this room so important.

Many of you work directly with children, families and communities. You provide prevention, education, treatment and early intervention, while recognising the person in front of you — not simply the clinical issue.

You build relationships. You help people understand their health. You identify problems early. And you have the opportunity to make a difference that can last well beyond the appointment itself.

That is important work, and it deserves to be recognised.

I am particularly heartened to see a profession looking forward with confidence: strengthening its voice, supporting its workforce, embracing innovation and working together as a united sector.

Lasting change rarely comes from one profession working alone.

It comes from collaboration, sharing knowledge, listening to communities and having the courage to ask whether the way we have always done things is still the best way.

Your commitment to equity, culturally safe care and genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is an important part of that future.

Your theme this year is "Illuminating Oral Health under Southern Skies."
What a great title.

Many of you will know that, on the right night, when the sky is clear and conditions are right, we can look south and see the Aurora Australis, the Southern Lights, rippling across the Tasmanian sky.

It is one of the most extraordinary things this island offers, and it is a wonderful metaphor for what a Congress like this can achieve.

A light shared. An idea passed from one colleague to another. Research translated into practice. Experience shared with the next generation. A profession learning from itself and becoming stronger because of it. The Aurora is most spectacular when many points of light come together. I think that is true of your profession too.

Dental therapists. Oral health therapists. Dental hygienists. Dentists. Dental assistants. Educators. Researchers. Policy makers. Community health professionals.

Different skills, experiences and perspectives, but one shared purpose: Better oral health. Better access. Better lives for the people you serve.

So, over the coming days, I encourage you to make the most of this Congress. Learn. Challenge yourselves. Ask the questions you have been saving. Share what you know. Make new connections and renew old ones.

Celebrate sixty years of dental therapy and thirty years of oral health therapy. You have earned that celebration.

It is now my great pleasure to declare the Oral Health Association of Australia Congress 2026 officially open.

Thank you and enjoy every moment.