

STRENGTHENING ORAL HEALTH SYSTEMS UNDER THAILAND'S DECENTRALIZATION REFORM

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Background

Oral health plays a vital role in Thailand's primary health care system, with dental nurses as key frontline providers. The 2022 decentralization reform Act, which transferred Sub-district Health Promoting Hospital from Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) to Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAOs), created opportunities for more adaptive, locally tailored oral health service models.

Objectives

To highlight local innovations following decentralization reform on oral health services, and identify lessons for sustainable system strengthening.

Methodology

A qualitative study was conducted in 2024 across eight provinces through interviews with provincial dental officers and PAO executives and group discussions with dental personnel. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in system adaptation, collaboration, and service continuity under decentralization.

Major findings

Decentralization reform promoted locally responsive oral health services driven by strong collaboration and leadership, but fragmented workforce structures and weak referral pathways continue to limit service continuity.

Chiang Rai

Context: Rapid growth of aging population (25% of population aged 60+)

Innovation: Home-based oral care for dependent older adults

Phrae

Context: Declining fertility rate

Innovation: Improving quality of child development including oral health through fluoride varnish, toothbrushing campaigns with PAO-provincial public health office coordination

Nakhon Sawan

Context: Large working-age population requiring accessible services

Innovation: Utilizing big data for oral health service planning and increasing working hours of dental clinics

Phuket

Context: High proportions of migrated workers

Innovation: Expanded coverage through public-private partnerships and workforce investment to improve oral health services

Khon Kaen

Context: Substantial school-aged population

Innovation: Primary care and community oral health services managed by PAO, school-based programs supported by PAO

Maha Sarakham

Context: Majority rural area

Innovation: Enhanced multidisciplinary approach at community level with PAO-provincial public health office collaboration

Prachinburi

Context: Very low population growth (<0.4%)

Innovation: Sustained school-based oral health program through interagency collaboration

Surat Thani

Context: More than 100 small islands

Innovation: Expanded outreach using dental nurse-village health volunteers (VHV) collaboration to reach underserved and vulnerable populations

Conclusion

- Decentralization reform has enabled **locally tailored oral health innovations**, with provinces demonstrating effective models aligned with demographic needs.
- Sustained coordination between PAOs and MOPH** is essential to maintain service continuity and quality, especially amid a fragmented dental workforce.
- Strong local governance and community engagement** are key to building resilient, equitable oral health systems under demographic transition.

Policy recommendations

- Establish stronger PAO-MOPH coordination mechanisms** to ensure seamless referral pathways, clinical supervision, and coherent service delivery.
- Strengthen local system capacity** by integrating oral health information systems and building the competencies of dental nurses and PAO managers.
- Expand community and cross-sectoral engagement** by empowering VHVs and promoting public-private partnerships to reach vulnerable populations.