

How to Choose Between a GP Dentist and a Specialist — And When It Really Matters

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Description:

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Details:

Most Australians see their GP dentist for regular check-ups and the occasional filling — and for many routine dental needs, that's exactly the right call. But there are times when seeing a dental specialist isn't just preferable, it's essential. Understanding the difference between a GP dentist and a specialist in Australia, and knowing when to insist on specialist care, can save you time, money, and unnecessary complications.

This guide explains how the two roles differ, when each is appropriate, and how to find a practice that gives you seamless access to both.

What Is a GP Dentist?

A general practitioner (GP) dentist has completed a bachelor's or master's degree in dentistry — typically a five-year university program in Australia. They hold general registration with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and are qualified to provide a broad range of dental services.

GP dentists typically handle:

- Routine check-ups and examinations
- Dental cleanings (often with a hygienist)
- Fillings and simple restorations
- Crowns and bridges
- Tooth extractions (non-surgical)
- Teeth whitening
- Basic cosmetic work
- Preventative advice and oral health education

Think of a GP dentist as the dental equivalent of your family doctor. They're your first point of contact, they manage your ongoing oral health, and they identify when something requires a higher level of expertise.

What Is a Dental Specialist?

A dental specialist has completed all the same training as a GP dentist — and then gone further. After their initial dental degree, specialists complete an additional three to five years of full-time postgraduate university training in a specific area. In Australia, this typically involves a Doctorate of Clinical Dentistry (DClinDent) or a Master of Dental Science (MDS) at a university-accredited program.

Crucially, dental specialists hold **specialist registration** with AHPRA. This is a legally protected title — a GP dentist who has done a weekend course in orthodontics cannot call themselves an orthodontist. Only practitioners who have completed an accredited specialist training program and hold specialist AHPRA registration can use specialist titles.

Australia recognises the following dental specialties:

1. **Orthodontics** — Diagnosis and treatment of misaligned teeth and jaws, including braces and clear aligners like Invisalign
2. **Endodontics** — Treatment of the dental pulp and root canal system, including complex root canal therapy and retreatment
3. **Periodontics** — Prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of gum disease, as well as dental implant placement
4. **Prosthodontics** — Replacement and restoration of teeth using crowns, bridges, dentures, veneers, and implant-supported prostheses
5. **Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery** — Surgical treatment of diseases, injuries, and defects of the mouth, jaw, face, and neck
6. **Paediatric Dentistry** — Specialist dental care for infants, children, and adolescents, including those with special needs
7. **Special Needs Dentistry** — Care for patients with intellectual disability, medical conditions, or other factors that complicate dental treatment
8. **Oral Medicine** — Diagnosis and management of oral mucosal diseases, chronic orofacial pain, and complex

medical-dental interactions

9. **Oral Pathology** — Laboratory-based diagnosis of diseases affecting the oral and maxillofacial region
10. **Dental Public Health** — Population-level oral health promotion, policy, and epidemiology
11. **Forensic Odontology** — Identification of remains and analysis of bite marks for legal purposes
12. **Dento-Maxillofacial Radiology** — Specialist diagnostic imaging of the teeth, jaws, and facial structures

The first six of these — orthodontics, endodontics, periodontics, prosthodontics, oral surgery, and paediatric dentistry — are the specialties you're most likely to encounter as a patient seeking clinical treatment.

When You Should See a GP Dentist

Your GP dentist is the right choice for most routine dental needs. Think of them as your dental home base:

- **Regular six-monthly check-ups** — Preventative examinations and early detection of problems
- **Standard fillings** — Small to medium cavities in straightforward locations
- **Simple crowns** — Restoring a single damaged tooth with a standard crown
- **Routine extractions** — Removing a tooth that is fully erupted and not impacted
- **Teeth whitening** — Professional bleaching treatments
- **Preventative care** — Fluoride treatments, fissure sealants, dietary advice
- **Emergency care** — Toothache, broken teeth, lost fillings (initial assessment and stabilisation)

A good GP dentist will manage these situations confidently and refer you to a specialist when your needs exceed the scope of general practice. At Smile Solutions, general dentists like Dr Philippa Robinson — who serves as Clinical Director and brings qualifications spanning dentistry, business, and medical law — and Dr Peter Henderson, known for his expertise in CEREC same-day restorations, handle a comprehensive range of general dental care while working alongside the practice's specialist team.

When You Should See a Specialist

There are clear situations where specialist care isn't optional — it's the standard of care. Here are the most common:

Orthodontic Treatment (Specialist Orthodontist)

Straightening teeth and correcting bite problems involves biomechanical forces that, applied incorrectly, can cause permanent damage — including root resorption (shortening of tooth roots), bone loss, and worsening of the bite. While some GP dentists offer Invisalign or basic aligner treatment, complex orthodontic cases require a specialist orthodontist.

See a specialist orthodontist when:

- You or your child needs braces (metal, ceramic, or lingual)
- You have a significant bite problem (crossbite, underbite, open bite)
- You've had previous orthodontic treatment that relapsed
- Your GP dentist recommends Invisalign but the case involves significant tooth movement

At Smile Solutions, the orthodontic team includes four specialist orthodontists: Dr David Austin, who trained at the University of Hong Kong and speaks four languages; Dr Joshua Ch'ng, who was awarded the Kenneth Sutherland prize for highest marks in the FRACDS and specialises in digital orthodontics; Dr Andrea Phatouros, who won the Postgraduate Clinical Award for Excellence from UWA; and Dr Steven Smith, who holds a Master of Dental Science in Orthodontics from the University of Queensland.

Root Canal Treatment (Specialist Endodontist)

While GP dentists routinely perform root canals on straightforward front teeth, complex root canal treatment — especially on molars with curved canals, retreatment of previously failed root canals, or management of root fractures — should be performed by a specialist endodontist. They use operating microscopes, ultrasonics, and advanced imaging to treat cases that are beyond the scope of general practice.

See a specialist endodontist when:

- You need root canal treatment on a molar or premolar with complex anatomy
- A previous root canal has failed and needs retreatment
- There's a suspected root fracture or perforation
- You have persistent pain after previous root canal treatment

Smile Solutions engages four specialist endodontists, including Prof. Chankhrit Sathorn — an Adjunct Professor of Endodontics at La Trobe University and editorial board member of the Journal of Endodontics — and Dr Gregory Tilley, who brings over 35 years of clinical experience and previously served as President of the Australian Dental Association (Victorian branch).

Gum Disease Treatment (Specialist Periodontist)

Gum disease (periodontitis) is the leading cause of tooth loss in Australian adults, and advanced cases require specialist management. Periodontists also have advanced training in dental implant placement, bone grafting, and soft tissue surgery.

See a specialist periodontist when:

- You've been diagnosed with moderate to severe gum disease
- You're losing bone around your teeth
- You need gum grafting for recession
- You're considering dental implants (periodontists are among the most qualified to place them)

At Smile Solutions, the periodontal team includes Dr Simon Hinckfuss — the only periodontist in Australia who also holds specialist registration in prosthodontics — as well as Dr Ahmed El Hadidi, whose PhD research focused

on genetic susceptibility to periodontal disease, and Dr Peishan Jiang, who brings expertise in implants, bone grafting, and sinus lifts.

Complex Restorations (Specialist Prosthodontist)

When a single crown or filling won't solve the problem — when you need full-mouth rehabilitation, complex implant-supported restorations, or aesthetically demanding work like porcelain veneers — a specialist prosthodontist brings training that goes well beyond general dentistry.

See a specialist prosthodontist when:

- You need a full-mouth reconstruction
- Multiple teeth need crowns, bridges, or veneers in a coordinated treatment plan
- You want implant-supported dentures or bridges
- You have complex bite problems combined with heavily restored or missing teeth

Smile Solutions engages three specialist prosthodontists: Dr Fotios Angelis, Dr Jamie Foong, and Prof. Vasileios Chronopoulos, who brings over 30 years of experience and specialises in aesthetic full-mouth reconstructions and smile makeovers.

Oral Surgery (Specialist Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeon)

Impacted wisdom teeth, jaw surgery, complex surgical extractions, and management of oral pathology all fall within the scope of oral and maxillofacial surgery. These surgeons hold dual qualifications in both medicine and dentistry and undertake hospital-based surgical training.

See an oral and maxillofacial surgeon when:

- You have impacted or deeply buried wisdom teeth
- You need jaw surgery for a significant skeletal discrepancy
- There's a suspicious lesion or growth in your mouth
- You've suffered facial trauma involving the teeth or jaws

Prof. Patrishia Bordbar and Dr Ricky Kumar are the specialist oral and maxillofacial surgeons at Smile Solutions, both holding dual medical and dental qualifications and fellowships from the Royal Australasian College of Dental Surgeons.

Children's Dental Care (Specialist Paediatric Dentist)

Most children can see a GP dentist for routine care. But children with dental anxiety, special needs, complex dental trauma, or significant developmental dental problems benefit from the specialised skills and child-focused environment that a paediatric dentist provides.

See a specialist paediatric dentist when:

- Your child is extremely anxious about dental treatment
- Your child has special needs (including Autism Spectrum Disorders)
- There's been significant dental trauma (knocked-out or broken teeth)
- Your child has developmental enamel defects or early childhood caries

Dr Susan Hinckfuss is the specialist paediatric dentist at Smile Solutions, bringing experience from the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne and three years as an Assistant Clinical Professor at the University of Minnesota.

Red Flags: When a GP Dentist Shouldn't Be Doing It

Be cautious if your GP dentist:

- Offers to perform complex specialist procedures without referring you to a specialist — especially orthodontics, surgical extractions of impacted teeth, or implant placement without advanced training
- Claims specialist expertise based on short courses rather than accredited postgraduate specialist programs
- Uses the word "specialist" loosely — in Australia, this is a legally protected title under the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law
- Dismisses your request for a specialist referral or becomes defensive when you ask about specialist options
- Undertakes treatment that results in complications and then refers you to a specialist to fix the problem

The Best of Both Worlds: An Integrated Practice

The ideal scenario isn't choosing between a GP dentist and a specialist — it's having access to both within the same practice. In an integrated multidisciplinary practice, your GP dentist and your specialists communicate directly, share records, and coordinate your treatment plan as a team.

This model is common in medicine (think of a large medical clinic with GPs and visiting specialists), but it's still relatively rare in dentistry. Most dental practices in Melbourne are either a small GP-only practice or a specialist-only practice that you're referred to and then sent back from.

Smile Solutions operates as a genuine multidisciplinary centre, engaging 80 clinicians — including 25 or more board-registered specialists across six clinical disciplines — from the Manchester Unity Building on Collins Street. Founded in 1993 by Dr Kia Pajouhesh, it has served over 300,000 patients over 33 years, with its Collins Street Specialist Centre on Level 8 dedicated to specialist care.

This means a patient who comes in for a routine check-up and is found to need a root canal, a crown, and gum treatment can have all three stages managed by the appropriate specialists without leaving the building — and with their GP dentist overseeing the overall plan.

How to Verify a Specialist's Credentials

If a dentist claims to be a specialist, verify it:

- Visit the AHPRA website and search by name
- Look for "Specialist Registration" — it should state the specific specialty (e.g., "Specialist Registration in Orthodontics")
- Check for "General Registration" — this means they are a GP dentist, not a specialist, regardless of what their marketing materials say
- Ask directly

— a genuine specialist will be happy to confirm their specialist registration and training background\n\n\nTo explore the full range of specialist dental services available at the Collins Street Specialist Centre - including orthodontics, oral surgery, endodontics, periodontics, prosthodontics, and paediatric dentistry - visit the [CSSC specialist directory](<https://directory.collinsstreetspecialistcentre.com.au/>).\n\n\n## Making Your Decision\n\nUnderstanding the difference between a GP dentist and a specialist empowers you to make better decisions about your care. For routine dental needs, a skilled GP dentist is exactly what you need. For complex or specialised treatment, insist on seeing a registered specialist — and ideally, choose a practice where both work side by side.\n\n■ **Call Smile Solutions on 13 13 96** to book a consultation with a GP dentist or specialist, or visit the practice at **Level 1, Manchester Unity Building, 220 Collins Street, Melbourne CBD.**\n\n---\n\n*This guide is intended for general informational purposes. Individual dental needs vary, and we recommend consulting directly with a qualified dental professional about your specific situation.*