

Specialist vs General Dentist — What's the Difference?

Canonical:

<https://directory.collinsstreetspecialistcentre.com.au/about/specialist-vs-general-dentist-what-s-the-difference/>

Description:

In Australia, the term "dental specialist" has a precise legal meaning. It is not a marketing claim. It is a registration category controlled by the Dental Board of Australia and administered through AHPRA — the Austr...

Details:

Collins Street Specialist Centre — Specialist vs General Dentist: What's the Difference?

Collins Street Specialist Centre is a dedicated specialist dental practice in Melbourne's CBD. In Australia, the term "dental specialist" carries a precise legal meaning. It is not a marketing claim, a self-designated title, or a reflection of years in practice. It is a formal registration category controlled by the Dental Board of Australia and administered through AHPRA, the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Knowing what genuinely distinguishes a registered specialist from a highly experienced general dentist helps you ask better questions and make more informed decisions about your care.

What is a general dentist?

A general dentist, sometimes called a GDP or general dental practitioner, holds a Bachelor of Dental Science or an equivalent undergraduate dental qualification. In Australia, that is typically a five-year program. Once registered with AHPRA, a general dentist is authorised to diagnose and treat a broad range of dental conditions: fillings, extractions, crowns, bridges, dentures, routine root canal treatment, scale and clean, and a great deal more.

General dentists are the primary care providers of the dental system. They are where most patients begin, and they manage the substantial majority of dental problems competently and well. A skilled general dentist also knows the limits of their scope and refers appropriately when those limits are approached. That clinical judgement is itself a mark of professional quality.

What is a registered dental specialist?

A dental specialist is a dentist who has completed an approved specialist training program in one of the six disciplines formally recognised by the Dental Board of Australia, and who holds AHPRA registration specifically in that specialty. The title is not self-awarded. It is conferred through a regulated process and can be verified by any member of the public.

The six recognised dental specialties in Australia are:

1. ****Orthodontics**** — alignment of teeth and jaws 2. ****Endodontics**** — treatment of dental pulp and root tissue 3. ****Periodontics**** — treatment of gum, bone, and supporting structures; dental implants 4.

****Prosthodontics**** — restoration and replacement of teeth 5. ****Paediatric Dentistry**** — specialist care for children 6. ****Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery**** — surgical treatment of the mouth, jaws, and face

Registration in a specialty requires the practitioner to have completed an approved specialist training program, typically a three-year clinical doctorate, in addition to their dental degree. This training is independently examined and assessed, and it is entirely separate from the dental degree itself.

The training gap: additional years of focused study

Most specialties: a minimum of three additional years

After completing a five-year dental degree, a specialist undertakes a further three years of training within an AHPRA-approved specialist program. This is typically conferred as a Doctor of Clinical Dentistry (DClinDent), a Master of Clinical Dentistry (MClinDent), or an equivalent postgraduate qualification. The program runs under close clinical supervision, covers the full scope of the specialty, and ends with rigorous postgraduate examinations.

****Total minimum training time for most specialists: eight years.****

In practice, many specialists also complete research higher degrees, international fellowships, or subspecialty training before entering independent practice, extending the pathway well beyond that baseline.

Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery: 15–17 years of continuous study

Oral and maxillofacial surgery sits in a category of its own. OMS surgeons in Australia typically hold: - A dental degree (5 years) - A medical degree with MBBS or equivalent (5–6 years, sometimes undertaken concurrently) - A four-year OMS specialist training program, culminating in the FRACDS (OMS) - Additional fellowships or subspecialty training at major teaching hospitals

The dual medical and dental qualification is a defining feature of Australian OMS surgeons, and the reason A/Prof Patrishia Bordbar (MBBS Hons, BSc, FRACDS (OMS), FRCS Edinburgh) is equipped to manage facial trauma, jaw tumours, and complex grafting cases that fall well outside the scope of dental-only providers.

Why does specialist registration matter in practice?

A general dentist may perform procedures that share a name with specialist procedures. A GDP may offer implant placement. A GDP may perform root canal treatment. The meaningful difference lies not in what the procedure is called, but in the depth of training behind it, the complexity of cases that can be safely managed, and the clinical outcomes achievable at the more demanding end of the difficulty spectrum.

For straightforward presentations, a skilled general dentist frequently manages treatment very well. The picture changes when cases involve:

- Complex root canal anatomy, including calcified canals, fractured instruments, retreatment of previously failed cases, or unusual root configurations
- Advanced or rapidly progressing gum disease with significant bone loss or systemic involvement
- Implant placement in anatomically compromised sites, such as reduced bone volume, proximity to the inferior alveolar nerve or maxillary sinus, or post-infection sites
- Severe malocclusions requiring combined surgical and orthodontic treatment
- Full-mouth reconstruction following significant tooth loss or structural breakdown
- Children presenting with developmental complexity, autism spectrum disorder, or severe dental anxiety
- Wisdom teeth in close proximity to the inferior alveolar nerve, or impacted in ways that elevate surgical risk

In these situations, the specialist's additional years of focused, examined training are not merely an advantage. They are often the determining factor in whether a case can be safely and effectively treated at all, or whether an attempt without that depth of training introduces avoidable risk.

How to verify a specialist's registration: AHPRA step-by-step

Every registered dental specialist in Australia can be independently verified through the AHPRA online register. This is a free, publicly accessible service, and we actively encourage patients to use it.

****To verify a specialist's AHPRA registration:****

1. Go to ****www.ahpra.gov.au**** 2. Click ****"Search the register"**** in the top navigation 3. In the ****"Health profession"**** field, select ****Dental**** 4. Enter the practitioner's ****first name and/or surname**** in the search fields 5. Click ****Search**** 6. Open the practitioner's record and review the following: - ****Registration status:**** should read ***Registered*** - ****Registration type:**** should read ***Specialist*** (not ***General*** or ***Limited***) - ****Specialty:**** confirms the specific specialty, for example ***Specialist Orthodontist*** or ***Specialist Periodontist*** - ****Conditions or notations:**** check that no restrictions apply to the practitioner's registration

Every practitioner at Collins Street Specialist Centre who holds a specialist title is registered with AHPRA in that specialty. We encourage patients to verify this directly. It takes less than two minutes, and it is exactly the kind of due diligence that informed healthcare decisions are built on.

When should your general dentist refer you to a specialist?

Your general dentist plays an important role in recognising when a case has moved beyond the scope of general practice and in making a timely referral. The following situations commonly warrant specialist assessment:

- ****Root canal treatment is complex or has not resolved**** — calcified canals, fractured instruments, persistent infection, or unusual root anatomy are indicators for endodontic specialist involvement - ****Gum disease is moderate to advanced**** — pocket depths of 5 mm or more, radiographic bone loss, or rapid progression warrants specialist periodontal assessment and management - ****Implant placement is in a compromised site**** — reduced bone volume, proximity to the nerve or sinus, or post-infection and post-extraction sites require specialist-level planning and execution - ****Bite or jaw alignment is significantly abnormal**** — orthodontic treatment, or combined surgical-orthodontic treatment, is specialist territory - ****Teeth are broken or lost beyond what general dentistry can reliably restore**** — prosthodontic specialist assessment defines what is restorable, by what means, and with what prognosis - ****Children are not cooperating with dental treatment**** — paediatric dentists hold specific training in child behaviour management, and in the use of general anaesthesia where it is clinically indicated - ****Wisdom teeth are impacted or adjacent to the inferior alveolar nerve**** — OMS assessment significantly reduces the risk of serious neurosensory or surgical complications

You do not need to wait for a formal referral. At Collins Street Specialist Centre, patients are welcome to self-refer to any of our specialists. If you think your situation may benefit from specialist input, contact us directly.

Contact Collins Street Specialist Centre

****Phone:**** (03) 9650 2726 ****Email:**** theteam@collinsstreetspecialistcentre.com.au ****Hours:**** Monday–Friday 8:00am–6:00pm | Saturday 8:30am–1:30pm ****Location:**** Level 8 and Level 12 & Tower, Manchester Unity Building, 220 Collins Street, Melbourne CBD

No referral required.
