



7 June 2023

Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: dental.services.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Select Committee secretariat,

Re: Senate Committee Inquiry into the provision of and access to dental services in Australia

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the Inquiry into the provision of and access to dental services in Australia. The health of all Australians depends on having a well-funded and skilled primary care sector, which includes oral health and dental care. Poor dental care can lead to poor nutrition, cardiovascular disease and affect a person's wellbeing (e.g. the ability to get a job and preserving their self-esteem)¹.

Comments on some of the inquiry's terms of reference are outlined below.

ToR a. the experience of children and adults in accessing and affording dental and related services

Significant financial barriers to accessing dental care remain in Australia. Socioeconomically vulnerable patients are at higher risk of oral disease and people on low incomes are more likely to delay dental visits and less likely to receive appropriate dental care.² Most dental services in Australia are available as private services. This poses a significant barrier for disadvantaged populations (including people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, people living with disability, refugees, remote communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples), leading to poorer health outcomes. Available services also often require the patient to make a co-payment which may be unaffordable to some.

Due to the lack of affordability for dental services, an increasing number of people from disadvantaged populations present at general practices. GPs can provide only limited support for these people (see also answer to **ToR i**). Prevention is an area GPs are well placed to make a difference. Prevention is thought to be the most cost-effective way to reduce the burden of oral disease. In 2020–21, almost 22 million Australians visited their GP.³ GPs are therefore well placed to integrate targeted preventive oral care into patient care and identify those at risk of dental decay and periodontal disease.²

Recommendation: Further support be provided for more public dental health services to be made available so vulnerable patients and communities have access to affordable dental care.

ToR b. the adequacy and availability of public dental services in Australia, including in outer-metropolitan, rural, regional and remote areas

The availability of services needs to be addressed. There are programs that provide dental services, for example through some Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs); however access varies by jurisdiction and within jurisdictions. The services that are available can be limited, with more complex procedures requiring referral to public dental services, therefore encountering the same barriers to access in the public dental



system, often with long waiting lists and long-distance travel. This is a bigger issue in rural and remote settings, but it is also an issue in metropolitan areas.

The limited access to public dental services, for both children and adults, will also impact on the treatment offered, eg. people are only offered tooth extraction compared to a private dentist whose service would offer tooth-saving procedures that take more time.

Recommendation: Address the availability of current services.

ToR f. the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis on access to dental and related services

The COVID pandemic has worsened dental care and delayed treatment for people as staff were transferred to other services to help with the pandemic. This has led to a backlog in care, especially in rural and remote areas that are already limited with their dental workforce and areas where COVID hit the hardest.

ToR g. pathways to improve oral health outcomes in Australia, including a path to universal access to dental services

Public health measures such as fluoridation of the water supply needs to be undertaken across Australia including in rural and regional areas. There is evidence that the use of fluoride in water, or topically, reduces dental decay in children.² More than 90% of the population in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania who have access to fluoridated water.⁴ In comparison, 76% and 78% of the population in Queensland and the Northern Territory respectively have access to fluoridation. The majority of those with no or limited access reside in rural and regional areas.^{4,5}

Recommendation: Ensure fluoridation of water supply is accessible across all of Australia, particularly in rural and regional areas.

ToR i. workforce and training matters relevant to the provision of dental services

There is often little to no preventive dental care provided in rural and remote areas due to lack of resources. As a consequence, GPs working in rural and remote communities have a greater need to maintain their skills and knowledge in dental care. The RACGP has contributed to education and training to support GPs in providing oral health as part of general practice. This includes education to familiarise GPs with different presentations for dental-related trauma and brief management plans, such as:

- [Emergency dental for rural GPs webinar](#)
- [Management of dental trauma by general practitioners](#)

In service poor areas, timing can be critical when addressing trauma presentations and delays to care can have significant impact on the prognosis of oral hard and soft tissues.

Recommendation: Ensure appropriate training is provided for health professionals to deliver preventive dental care in service poor areas.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback to the Inquiry. For any enquiries regarding this letter, please contact Stephan Groombridge, National Manager, Practice management, Standards and Quality Care on 03 8699 0544 or stephan.groombridge@racgp.org.au.



RACGP
Royal Australian College
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Healthy Profession.
Healthy Australia.

Yours sincerely

Dr Nicole Higgins
President

References:

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. [Oral health and dental care in Australia](#). [Internet]. Canberra: AIHW, 2023. [Accessed 26 May 2023].
2. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. Guidelines for preventive activities in general practice. 9th edn, updated. East Melbourne, Vic: RACGP, 2018.
3. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. [General Practice: Health of the Nation 2022](#). East Melbourne, Vic: RACGP, 2022.
4. National Health and Medical Research Council. [2017 Public Statement – Water fluoridation and human health](#). Canberra: NHMRC, 2017.
5. Queensland Government. [Water fluoridation](#). [Internet]. QLD: QLD Government, 2021. [Accessed 5 June 2023].