

MEDIA RELEASE

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Prioritising oral health is vital for aged care residents

With the announcement of a Royal Commission into aged care, the Australian Dental Association NSW is calling for oral health care to be made a priority for residents of all aged care facilities.

The President of ADA NSW, Dr Neil Peppitt, said the elderly are especially vulnerable to oral disease. Tooth decay, pain, infection and gum disease can go untreated in residential aged care facilities, with serious consequences for people's health.

"Poor oral health can lead to serious problems such as malnutrition, which is associated with an increased risk of infection, falls and fractures," Dr Peppitt said. "Unfortunately, oral health care is frequently overlooked in the aged care setting, as staff may not have the time or training to provide it."

Dr Peppitt said that in many cases, oral disease in senior Australians is linked to their inability to access dental services or prevent problems through good oral hygiene.

"Reduced mobility means many residents cannot clean their teeth properly, or visit a dentist for treatment," he said. "We need to make it easier for people to get the care they need."

ADA NSW has joined several other oral health bodies in supporting Senior Smiles, a preventive program developed by oral health researchers from the University of Newcastle for people living in residential aged care facilities.

Senior Smiles places a qualified oral health practitioner in aged care facilities to provide residents with risk assessments, care plans and referral pathways for dental treatment, and to deliver oral health instruction and education to residents, their families, nurses and care staff.

The program has been running successfully in Sydney, Newcastle and on the NSW Central Coast. Senior Smiles' architect and chief investigator, Dr Janet Wallace, hopes it will be implemented in all residential aged care facilities nationwide.

"Currently residents in aged care facilities are treated for oral health conditions when it becomes an emergency, and that's really not good enough," Dr Wallace said.

"These people are at their most frail and vulnerable. Many residents are unable to advocate for themselves and need qualified oral health professionals to identify problems and arrange appropriate and timely dental care for them.

"Poor oral health impacts on general health and, most importantly, quality of life. Programs such as Senior Smiles make sure their oral health is looked after, so they can enjoy their food, be comfortable, and smile."

About ADA NSW: ADA NSW is the peak professional association for dentists and dental students in NSW and the ACT with 4,500 members. ADA NSW has been supporting dentists and promoting good oral health in the community since 1929.

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