MEDIA RELEASE

December 7, 2018

Older Australians need better access to oral health services

The Australian Dental Association NSW is calling for better access to oral health services for older Australians, after a new report found dental treatment was the most difficult medical service for this group to access.

The State of the (Older) Nation 2018 Report, just released by the Council on the Ageing (COTA), is the most comprehensive national study undertaken into the views of Australians aged 50 years and older. It found 6% of older Australians were unable to access the dental services they wanted in the last year – three times as many as could not access GPs at a medical centre, non-elective surgery, optical services and physiotherapy. The main barriers to accessing medical services were costs, long waiting lists, and the travel distance required, the report found.

There are 7.9 million people in Australia aged 50 years or over – almost one-third of the population – and oral health generally deteriorates as people age. Those living in residential aged care facilities have some of the poorest oral health in Australia.

The President of ADA NSW, Dr Neil Peppitt, said governments needed to make oral health a priority and fund it appropriately.

"Healthy teeth and mouths are vital to good health overall," Dr Peppitt said. "Poor oral health is linked to chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, dementia and respiratory disease. By investing more money in oral health and recognising the importance of preventive care, governments could save millions of dollars in health costs each year."

Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in Australia, with people aged 55 to 74 years old having, on average, 22.2 decayed, missing or filled teeth.

Older Australians are also at higher risk of developing gum (periodontal) disease, which can cause tooth loss. Moderate or severe periodontal disease affects 44% of Australians aged 55 to 74 years, and 61% of those aged 75 years and over. Dental conditions are also a leading cause of potentially preventable hospitalisations.

But despite the clear need, only 2.1% of government health spending is dedicated to dental services. In NSW, almost 110,000 people are on the public dental waiting list.

"Making oral health services more accessible would help improve the health, wellbeing and quality of life of older Australians," Dr Peppitt said. "We join with COTA in calling for all politicians to commit to improving access to oral and dental health services for our older citizens."

About ADA NSW: ADA NSW is the peak professional association for dentists and dental students in NSW and the ACT with 4,600 members. ADA NSW has been supporting dentists and promoting good oral health in the community since 1929.

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