KEY MESSAGES

Incorporating dental professionals into aged care facilities

June 2016

Linda Slack-Smith, Angela Durey, Clair Scrine

Policy context

Meeting the oral health needs of Australia’s growing ageing population is a key policy issue. Oral health is an important determinant of general health and quality of life but oral health needs are often separated from general health needs. Oral health care in residential aged care facilities has been widely recognised as inadequate. The ambivalent attitudes of carers and non-dental health professionals to providing oral care, their limited oral health knowledge and inadequate training have been identified as barriers to good oral health outcomes for residents. Dentists also lack training and resources to undertake geriatric dentistry; there is often a lack of suitable space to conduct safe and effective oral examinations and treatment and domiciliary dental services for residents are generally unavailable. Accessing private dental care is often out of reach physically and financially for many residents. Limited collaboration across health care sectors (between dentists, aged care workers and other health professions) is a cause for concern. The limited number of geriatric-specialised dental services in Australia adds to poor oral health outcomes for older persons. The oral health status of older adults can decline with failing health, systemic diseases and medical treatment for comorbidities, with a profound effect on nutritional status and quality of life.

Ageing Australians with high dental treatment needs have been recognised as a concern. In order to better understand the context of oral health in residential aged care facilities, this project investigated the perceptions of dental professionals of the barriers and enablers they face in providing oral care to residents in aged care facilities.

Key messages

- There is a need for inter-professional collaboration as a strategy to improve oral health outcomes for residents in aged care facilities.
- There is a need for education and training in oral health and disease prevention for non-dental health professionals. A large percentage of non-dental health professionals working in aged care come from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and this needs to be considered when designing effective training programs.
- Education and training in geriatric dental and health care is required for dental professionals (both general dentists and as specialists).
- In-depth qualitative investigation is important to truly understand the perspectives of different stakeholders.

The research reported in this paper is a project of the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute, which is supported by a grant from the Australian Government Department of Health under the Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development Strategy. The information and opinions contained in it do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Australian Government Department of Health.