

Policy 1.01 Reshaping oral healthcare for older Australians: taking a holistic approach

The cost benefit of improved oral health for older Australians

The findings of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety¹ have shone a spotlight on a problem that has been hidden from the public eye for decades. The current woeful state of oral health in older adults living in Australia requires urgent attention to reduce human suffering. The Australian Oral Health Policy Institute is calling upon the Australian government to make a meaningful commitment to support the recommendations of the Royal Commission and enable our elderly to live free of pain, consume a nutritious diet that promotes overall health and maintain their dignity.

Whether living independently, with assistance in the community or in residential aged care, older adults must have access to appropriate oral health care that meets their economic constraints, geographic situation and cultural requirements. Polypharmacy, limited mobility, altered diet and reduced ability to perform independent personal oral care measures impose serious threats to oral health and consequently general health that can spiral rapidly out of control when left unchecked.

Oral health is further impacted by the social determinants of health, resulting in even poorer outcomes for those who experience economic disadvantage, are from rural or remote regions or are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. In order to address the significant deficits in oral health a range of initiatives are required. Oral health care in Australia must become an integral part of general health services embracing a holistic, patient-centred approach that addresses common risk factors. Indigenous older adults must have access to oral health care services that are culturally appropriate and aim to reduce the significant disparities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The Australian Oral Health Policy Institute urges Australian health policy-makers to provide the funding necessary to roll out proven oral health programs that are available and ready to be scaled up throughout the nation. Evidence-based models of care have been economically evaluated showing significant overall healthcare savings. Lack of affordable oral healthcare is the most significant barrier to improving the health, happiness and dignity of our vulnerable elderly population. The time for action is now! As Australia's peak body for Oral Health policy, we ask the Australian government to listen to our call to provide our elderly with the opportunity for better health as part of the national priority to care for our elderly.

¹ <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/final-report>