

## AGED CARE DENTAL INITIATIVES

Australia has an ageing population. As the proportion of older Australians increases the oral health needs for the elderly will continue to increase in the 21st century. Greater focus on prevention and care must be addressed as a matter of priority.<sup>1</sup>

Given that many older Australians are retaining their natural teeth, dental health for older people is more complex today than ever before. Increasing evidence is emerging that supports the link between oral health and overall levels of general health. Research has demonstrated that cardiovascular disease, aspiration pneumonia, nutritional deficiencies and stroke are some of the possible complications that can result from poor oral health. Pain and social isolation are frequently linked to poor dental health. Ageing can mean that people are less able to manage many customary daily living tasks that such as cleaning teeth that were once second nature.

Studies have shown that many residents being admitted to residential care facilities have compromised oral health and high levels of oral disease. In many cases it is going unchecked. It will deteriorate if oral hygiene and mouth care planning is not undertaken and implemented. According to a new report released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Residential Aged Care in Australia 2006-2007: a statistical overview*, at 30 June 2007, there were 170,071 operational residential aged care places, an increase of 3,780 compared with 30 June 2006.<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to improve the level of oral health amongst people in residential aged care facilities, the South Australian Dental Service has initiated two innovative and significant projects, the *Oral Health for Older People: Nursing Home Care Program* and the *Better Oral Health in Residential Care Project*.

### Oral Health for Older People: Nursing Home Care Program

The main points of this program are summarised below:

- Funded by the SA Dental Service and developed as a collaborative partnership with the Australian Dental Association (SA Branch) and private dental practitioners, the programme commenced as a two-year demonstration project in 2003.
- A small number of private dentists experienced in delivering dental treatment services to older people living in Residential Aged Care Facilities (RACFs) were recruited by the SA Dental Service.
- For residents to be eligible for publicly-funded dental care they required either a Pensioner Concession Card or Health Card (however, those who were ineligible were still able to receive dental treatment services as private patients).
- A fee for service payment structure, (the 'Aged Care Dental Scheme'), was developed based on the Department of Veterans Affairs Licensed Dental Officer schedule. Via the scheme, all initial assessments were fully covered but RACF residents were required to contribute towards the cost of their dental care by paying a small co-payment. An additional feature of the scheme was that any RACF resident could receive an initial assessment which was fully covered, regardless of concession status. Subsequent dental treatment could then be arranged via their private dentist or the visiting dentist.
- The project aim was to improve the level of oral health amongst people in residential aged care facilities, thus improving their general health and quality of life.
- Central to the clinical service delivery model was the provision of clinical services on site using appropriate portable dental equipment.
- The uptake and acceptance of the project by RACF residents and staff and the participating private providers was evaluated after two years. The evaluation demonstrated continued commitment and involvement of the private providers and RACFs, and positive outcomes in terms of oral and overall general health and quality of life for project participants. As a result of these outcomes, the project developed into an ongoing programme which continues to be funded and supported by the SA Dental Service.
- Currently, residents of 48 RACFs are receiving dental treatment services from eight participating private dentists and one dental hygienist on a sessional basis. The frequency of treatment sessions at 25% of these facilities is from 1–4 times per month. The session frequency at the remaining RACFs is on average once every 2–3 months. Since the commencement of the programme in 2004, 2,000 individual RACF residents have received 3,600 dental courses of care incorporating 11,000 service items.

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- Ongoing achievements of the programme include:
  - The development of *The Oral Health Protocols for Residential Aged Care Facilities* – a nationally recognised publication. Specific information for RACF staff relates to the provision of oral hygiene assistance to residents, treatment guidelines for oral health conditions, provision of support and assistance for visiting dental teams, and documentation templates.
  - Provider meetings, partnership forums, and regular information updates - development of a network of private practitioners who have considerable experience in the field of aged care dentistry.
  - Awareness of the importance of oral health amongst the RACF sector.

### Better Oral Health in Residential Care Project

The main points of this project are summarised below:

- A collaborative project between the SA Dental Service, the aged care sector, the Australian Dental Association, medical practitioners and the nursing profession.
- The SA Dental Service is leading the \$1.3 million project. Funding was given by way of a grant provided by the Department of Health and Ageing's Encouraging Best Practice in Residential Aged Care (EBPRAC) Program.
- The two-year project is aimed at enabling medical general practitioners (GPs) and registered nurses (RNs) to assess the oral health status of residents in an aged care facility. Oral hygiene will be implemented by care workers trained in best oral health practice and timely dental treatment will be provided as required by dental professionals, following the development of oral health plans by RNs.
- The project complements *Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2004-2013* and has as its goal the development of an evidence-based, best practice model to promote better oral health within the Australian residential aged care sector.
- The project is being undertaken by a consortium led by the SA Dental Service, the Department of Human Services (Vic), the Centre for Oral Health Strategy (NSW) and six residential aged care facilities. The Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health will evaluate the project.
- The project builds on an earlier project to develop and trial an Oral Health Assessment Tool Kit, conducted in 2005.
- Participating GPs and RNs will be provided with the tool kit, incorporating multimedia educational materials to enable them to undertake an oral health assessment. RNs will develop care plans of residents' oral health needs in the context of overall general health. Their efforts will be supported by a training programme for care workers and an oral health educational portfolio.
- Participating residential aged care facilities include Helping Hand Parafield Gardens and Resthaven Craigmore in metropolitan Adelaide, Tanunda Lutheran Home in South Australia's Barossa Valley, Umoona Aged Care Service in Coober Pedy, Kara Aged Care Facility in Newcastle, New South Wales and Kyabram & District Health Service in Victoria.

More of these initiatives must be examined and plans put in place more universally to address the oral health needs of people in residential aged care facilities.

*Information provided by the South Australian Dental Service.*

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### References

1. National Advisory Committee on Oral Health (2004) *Healthy Mouths Healthy Lives: Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2004-2013*, A Committee Established by the Australian Health Minister's Conference.
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008. *Residential aged care in Australia 2006-07: a statistical overview*. Aged care statistics series 26. Cat. no. AGE 56. Canberra: AIHW.