

# Dental trial chews on improving aged-care options

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Dr Patel says addressing the problem of oral health in aged-care facilities was complex and needed a multi-level approach including collaborating with healthcare staff and families. Credit: iStock

A local trial bringing dental healthcare to elderly patients at a Perth aged-care facility is aiming to bridge the gap provided to people living in care.

Volunteer-run organisation Kimberley Dental Clinic (KDT) has, this year, been regularly visiting 20 [patients](#) at MercyCare, a Catholic-run not-for-profit care facility, as part of the WA-first trial.

KDT senior dental officer and director Dr Jilen Patel says previous studies showed there was a high prevalence of dental disease in residential facilities, which became exacerbated following admission into aged-care.

"So obviously it makes a massive impact on the resident's life and diet, speech and social interaction," Dr Patel says.

"Accessing dental care can become difficult because a lot of people don't know who to go to or haven't been assessed previously or are suffering in silence."

He says this was reflected in their findings with some patients needing extensive dental treatment.

But, he says, addressing the problem of oral health in aged-care facilities was complex and needed a multi-level approach including collaborating with healthcare staff and families.

"There are patients there that need extensive, extensive dental treatment but still accessing that and providing that service and the follow up management is difficult—there is no easy answer," he says.

## Holistic approach considered in trial

Dr Patel says a key aim of the trial involved the KDT team working with primary healthcare providers.

"Dentistry often works in silence, there is very little communication with nurses or [healthcare staff](#) so we wanted to work closely with stakeholders and residents and staff," he says.

They discovered the aged-care staff found assessing dental care for their residents difficult and they were unsure what to do for some patients with [dental disease](#) and assessments.

"There was a lot of dental breakdown, compromised functions and patients suffering without being able to access good care," he says.

"It is especially difficult with patients with things like dementia where they can't be fully communicative to what they are feeling."

MercyCare executive director of aged care services Carlo Calogero says the trial was a large step forward to improving dental care for the elderly in aged-care.

"For older people who are frail or have low mobility,

getting to regular dental appointments can be difficult, and likewise it can be hard to arrange for dentists to visit aged-care facilities," he says.

"As a result, [dental care](#) can deteriorate."

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