

## **Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland**

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## What has Oral Health got to do with elder abuse? Heaps!

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For a dental practitioner like me who has been working with persons living in care homes since 2014, I have seen many who have painful mouths, rotting teeth, dirty dentures, and limited food choices. This article will explain why so many older persons have poor oral health, clarify that the withholding of oral health care and dental treatment is defined as neglect, give an example of dental abuse, and describe how the epidemic of dental neglect is a form of elder abuse.

#### Poor oral health

As Medicare covers the whole body but not the mouth, people cannot access dental treatment in the same way that they can access a general practitioner (GP) visit, mental health treatment plans, eye check-ups, hospitalisations at a public hospital, and subsidised prescriptions under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

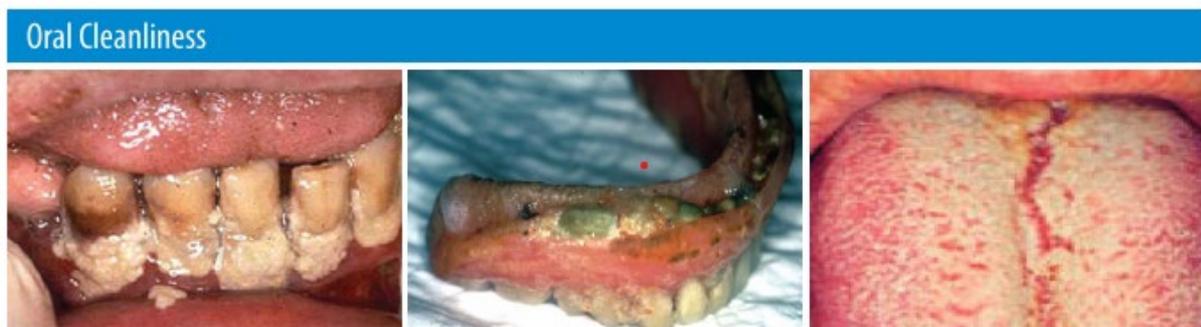
Access to public dental services is also limited as the state and territories only treat 7-20% of their eligible populations and waiting lists for dental treatment extend up to two (2) years in some areas, especially in regional, rural and remote areas.

For persons living in care homes or receiving care at home, federal funding does not include services provided by dental practitioners.

It is therefore not surprising that persons can enter care, not with years of dental neglect, but with decades of dental neglect.

#### Neglect

Oral diseases have been called a “neglected epidemic,” because, although they affect virtually the entire population, they have not been made a priority in our country (Allukian, 2008). Sadly, dental neglect has been true for children and adolescents as well as for adults and older persons (Ridsdale, et al., 2023; Sarri, et al., 2012). For some people, the lack of access to twice-daily oral health care, regular dental check-ups, preventive dental services (cleaning, fluoride treatment, etc.), and dental treatment to repair damage from dental diseases (toothaches, fillings and extractions) have been present throughout their whole lives.



(SA Dental Service, 2008)

Apart from the false teeth in the dentures wearing down, dentures need to be replaced every 5-10 years due to the loss of bone and changing facial structure. Some people are still wearing their first set of dentures that are now too big, ill-fitting, worn and fragile. Ill-fitting dentures are the main reason why people take their dentures out to eat – it is more comfortable to eat without them than with them. I have seen an 84-year-old woman who was still trying to wear her first set of dentures that were fitted when she was 16 years old – she had been wearing them for 68 years. The inability of older persons to have dentures replaced throughout life, is continued neglect.

### Residential care

For persons who are living in a care home, the withholding of personal care, such as or oral care, is given as an example of neglect as a reportable incident for the Serious Incident Response Scheme (SIRS) (ACQSC, 2022). Under the SIRS, all incidents should be recorded in a provider's incident management system (IMS) to ensure a timely and appropriate response that minimises impact, supports those affected and reduces the risk of recurrence. Unfortunately, very few incidents of oral health neglect are responded to in the appropriate manner.

### Abuse

For some women, they have not had any natural teeth for a long time. In the 1940s in Australia, Canada and Britain, it was common for young women to have all their teeth extracted and replaced with full dentures as a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday gift or before marriage. This marriage gift was done to save the husband money on future dental bills. Looking back on this now, this practice would be seen as female abuse.

With no natural teeth present, the bone in your upper and lower jaws resorbs due to lack of stimulation from biting and chewing. This results in a sunken or collapsed facial appearance. The reduction in bone density and volume occurs mostly in the first 18 months after extractions but continues over time. In this regard, facial disfiguration from full mouth extractions is an example of continued abuse.

### Dental neglect is a form of elder abuse

The inability of persons to access twice-daily oral health care and affordable dental treatment can last a lifetime. However, for older persons, the combination of systemic medical conditions, inflammation, immune responses and multiple prescriptions can result in oral health infections deteriorating rapidly. Health workers and personal carers should be aware of the dental histories and changing oral health care needs of older Australians in terms of assessment, prevention, care plans, intervention and referral pathways. Failure or neglect to respond to their oral health needs is a form of elder abuse.

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