

Dentist attention needed for geriatric patients

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“For older people, oral health issues can be a combination of effects of exposures over a life time, including sugar, smoking, alcohol, and the accumulation of dental problems,” Prof Slack-Smith says. Credit: Herry Lawford

Dental schools in Australia need to adjust their curriculum to better deal with tooth challenges for an ageing population, research says.

The University of Western Australia-led study says while experts have

promoted addressing geriatrics within dental training since the 1970s, little has been done to put recommendations into practice.

"It is predicted that more than 25 per cent of the population in developed countries will be over the age of 65 by 2020," School of Dentistry Professor Linda Slack-Smith says.

"The ageing of the population and increasing retention of teeth, often with complex restorations, is expected to increase the demand for [dental care](#) in [older people](#)."

Knowing the unique dental-health issues of the elderly is vital.

Geriatric dentists are trained to recognise symptoms that present in the teeth and gums relating to general health issues.

They're also skilled in working with dentures, which may have to be adjusted regularly due to changes in the jaw relating to the absence of teeth.

Poorly fitted dentures can lead to discomfort, loss of appetite and poor nutrition.

"For older people, oral health issues can be a combination of effects of exposures over a life time, including sugar, smoking, alcohol, and the accumulation of dental problems," Prof Slack-Smith says.

Medication impacts on oral health

"Also, as the population ages, more people are taking medicines, which impact on oral health, often through decreasing saliva flow and quality.

"All of these distinct issues have to be considered in training."

However, geriatric dentistry is not a dental specialty in Australia, with a limited number of qualified dental specialists able to meet expanding patient needs.

According to research 14.3 per cent of graduating dental students consider themselves well prepared to provide geriatric [oral health](#) care.

This is partly due to only a handful of courses offering placements in aged care facilities, which aren't mandatory.

In the US, Canada and Europe most dental schools have aspects of geriatric dentistry integrated into their curricula.

Prof Slack-Smith says while the Federal Government has recognised the need to address new challenges facing an [ageing population](#), including through the Living Longer Living Better program, this has not translated into funding support in dental training.

"It is time for academics, geriatric dental professional and policy makers to advocate for a world where social justice is valued, and promote geriatric dentistry education," Dr Slack-Smith says.

More information: "Geriatric dentistry, teaching and future directions." *Aust Dent J*. 2015 Mar;60 Suppl 1:125-30. [DOI: 10.1111/adj.12291](#)

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