

Research finds divide in dental health accessibility between city and regional areas

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A University of Western Australia study has found that although the number of dentists in rural and remote areas increased in recent years, it is still not keeping pace with the growth in demand and there is still a divide between access to dental treatment in cities compared to regional areas.

The researchers collected data on the numbers of patients and dentists in regional areas across New South Wales and Queensland and compared the numbers year by year between 2005 to 2014.

Lead researcher Dr. Yevgeni Dudko from UWA School of Human Sciences said although it was already known that there was a shortage of

dentists in regional areas, the study sought to better understand the changes over time and the distribution of dentists to patients in rural areas compared to the city.

"We found remote areas have seen a steady increase over the years—in 2014 there were 38.3 dentists in outer regional areas and 25 in very [remote areas](#) for every 100,000 people and this was around a 30 percent increase from 2005," Dr. Dudko said.

"However although this is a positive result, there is a larger number of people needing government-subsidised dental care, as indicated by the number of people on the waiting list, and this is still outpacing the growth in the eligible population by two to three times."

Dr. Dudko said subsidised dental care offered an important safety-net for at-risk members of the community, such as those from lower socioeconomic groups or the ageing population, however only 20 per cent of the eligible population were registered to receive that care.

"Government safety-net services are under pressure by the high demand, resulting in waiting lists that are often long, with close to half the patients on these lists outside of the metropolitan area," Dr. Dudko said.

"The problem is concerning because it shows that for the people who need [dental treatment](#) most it is harder to access."

Dr. Dudko said the importance of dental health care was further emphasised by the Productivity Commission report (March 2018) which found 'dental conditions were the second-highest cause of acute potentially preventable hospitalisations in 2015-16' across Australia.

The team hope that the study results, and their continued research in the area will highlight gaps in the public dental system so new ways of

developing better accessibility can be developed.

The study has been published in the *Australian Journal of Rural Health*.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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