KEY MESSAGES

Oral health of people with physical and intellectual disabilities

June 2016

Keuskamp D, Pradhan A, Brennan DS, Roberts-Thomson K

Policy context

Oral health impacts on general health and quality of life are more common among people with intellectual and physical disabilities than the general population. This inequality is compounded by their poor access to health care. While public dental care is available for a capped co-payment, resource constraints mean there are significant waiting times for treatment, and less emphasis on preventive care. Oral health knowledge among this group and their carers (where they require them) is also relatively poor. Carers of people with disabilities provide personal oral health care and are often ideally placed to detect problems and facilitate access to services. Training of carers in oral care is therefore strongly recommended. Independent, employed people with disabilities have the capacity to self-care and timely referral for dental treatment and oral health education may offer benefits to this group. This study aimed to benefit the oral health and quality of life of these two groups of people with special needs. First, by training carers in providing improved oral care for adults with disabilities. Second, by combining oral health education and timely referral for dental treatment for employees. Outcomes for carers and employees respectively were evaluated.

Key messages

> Training is suggested to have improved knowledge and confidence in oral care among the carers. Carers had the capacity to assess oral health to the extent needed for referral to dental professionals.

> Regular oral health education combined with enabling referral to treatment is suggested to have improved self-rated oral health and quality of life for employees. Dental fear and cost were identified as barriers to care.

> Employers of carers are recommended to implement regular training in oral care and assessment. Training should be integrated with evaluation and coordinated with public dental services and dental professionals specialised in care for people with disabilities.

> Encouragement and incentives should be provided for employers of people with disabilities to implement workplace programs for oral health education and referral for treatment.

> Opportunities within public dental care for people with disabilities to gain treatment should be expanded. These patients need to be actively followed up to ensure that they attend appointments.

> Further research is needed to identify barriers and enablers that facilitate the training of carers of people with disabilities.

The research reported in this paper is a project of the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute, which is supported by a grant from the Australian Government Department of Health under the Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development Strategy. The information and opinions contained in it do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Australian Government Department of Health.