KEY MESSAGES

Relationship of dental practitioners to rural primary care networks.

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Policy context

The oral health of Australians living in rural and regional areas has been identified as a priority in Australia's National Oral Health Plan (2015-2024). Rural and regional residents experience higher rates of dental caries (tooth decay) and are more likely to visit dentists for problems than people residing in metropolitan areas. Access to dental care in rural areas is poor and is made more difficult due to the maldistribution of dental practitioners in Australia in favour of larger cities. Also, the small size of many rural towns cannot support a full-time resident dentist. However, rural communities are served by a range of health care professionals who are often connected to each other and work in an extended capacity. This project investigated the existing relationship between rural health care practitioners and dentists/oral health professionals to determine if stronger links and cooperation could improve oral service provision.

Key messages

> Upstream, preventive strategies (such as oral health promotion and fluoridation) are critical to improving oral health and the most effective way to reduce downstream problem presentations.

> Rural and remote residents often present to GPs, local hospitals and pharmacies for a range of oral health problems. Further education of these health professionals on oral health would allow them to play a stronger role in oral health screening and surveillance and education through their regular interactions with patients.

> More regular visits and opportunities for resident or visiting dental practitioners to service both public and private patients in rural and remote communities would improve the access to and availability of oral health services.

> Cost of treatments, travel distances, lack of time and the low priority given to oral health are significant barriers that prevent access to quality dental care by rural residents.

> Better communication between primary care providers and dentists or dental services and clear referral pathways would help reduce the oral health disease burden in many rural areas.

> The availability of dental services in rural areas is partly dependent upon the recruitment and retention of dental professionals to these areas. Specific mentorship and other support programs should be provided to new graduates and dentists who locate and practice in more isolated communities. All dental students and new graduates should be provided with a rural/remote “rotation” to build capacity and enhance future workforce recruitment.