Main messages

1. **Good oral health is essential for healthy ageing**
   Oral health is a significant factor affecting older people's quality of life, overall health and wellbeing.

2. **Good oral health begins at home**
   Good oral health can be achieved at home by encouraging and supporting older people to maintain a simple self-care routine which includes:
   1. Care of natural teeth
   2. Care of dentures
   3. Relief of dry mouth
   4. Tooth friendly eating
   5. Seeing a dental professional
   6. Quitting smoking.

3. **It takes a team approach**
   The Better Oral Health in Home Care Model encourages a multidisciplinary team approach with GPs, nurses, care coordinators, home care workers, dental professionals, clients and their families sharing responsibility for maintaining good oral health by implementing one or more of four key oral health processes:
   1. Oral health assessment to identify older people in need of a dental referral
   2. Oral health care planning
   3. Assistance with daily oral care

Key findings

1. **Older people's quality of life**
   Implementation of the Better Oral Health in Home Care Model demonstrated positive improvements in home care clients' oral health related quality of life and wellbeing.

2. **Oral health care delivery**
   The Better Oral Health in Home Care Model provides the home care sector with four key oral health processes with which to improve oral health care delivery.

3. **Home care workers**
   Home care sector investment in staff development is crucial to support home care workers as key enablers in improving the oral health of older people in the home setting.

4. **Sustainability**
   Sustainable improvement in older peoples' oral health requires ongoing leadership and a formalised mechanism with which to facilitate collaboration between the aged care, dental and health education sectors.
Project summary

This is a summary of the Building Better Oral Health Communities Project which was funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services’ Encouraging Better Practice in Aged Care (EBPAC) Program from 2012-2014.

The project was led by SA Dental Service in collaboration with Helping Hand Aged Care Inc SA, Aboriginal Elders and Community Services Inc SA, BaptistCare NSW & ACT, Hunter New England Oral Health NSW and the University of Adelaide SA (School of Nursing & ARCPOH).

Background

A rapidly ageing population will bring with it significant changes to older people’s health and oral health profiles. With future estimates predicting 80% of formal aged care is to take place in the home setting, the home care sector will play a key role in helping older people age well at home.

It is known many oral conditions commonly experienced by older people can be successfully managed and/or prevented by effective daily oral care and timely access to dental care. Oral care is often taken for granted but is more difficult to achieve when an older person is compromised by physical frailty, cognitive impairment, functional dependence, chronic disease and polypharmacy.

Although older people may or may not visit a dental professional on a regular basis, clients receiving home care frequently see a range of aged care workers who are responsible for assessing and monitoring their health status as well as assisting with personal care. While oral care should be fundamental to personal care, this important aspect of health care tends to be overlooked. This is because care coordinators have not routinely considered oral care in care planning and home care workers lack the oral health knowledge and skills to provide effective oral care for older people.

Given the predicted demands for more complex home care this has significant implications for home care providers. Maintaining older people’s oral health will need to shift from its current low priority to a high priority.

Better Oral Health in Home Care Model

The Building Better Oral Health Communities Project aim was to support ageing well at home through the promotion of better oral health for older people receiving home care.

The project built on the success of a previous EBPAC project called Better Oral Health in Residential Care (2007-2009) which promoted a multidisciplinary model with GPs, registered nurses, care workers and dental professionals sharing responsibility for four key oral health processes: oral health assessment, oral health care planning, daily oral care and dental referral. The project used the four key processes and adapted them to suit the home care context.

Project outcomes

A six question oral health assessment tool was introduced. This tool does not require clinical assessment and could be easily used by non-nurse home care coordinators. Oral health care consisted of a simple preventative approach which focused on the daily care of natural teeth and care of dentures, relief of dry mouth, tooth friendly eating, seeing a dental professional and quitting smoking. A training program and a set of new resources were developed to support home care staff encourage older people to maintain better oral health care.

Following oral health assessment almost all of the older people participating in the project required a dental referral. Of those referred, 52% were identified as having high priority dental urgency, 47% were medium priority and 1% was low priority. This finding supports the need for timely access to dental care for home care clients. Oral health assessment results also showed about half of the participants had some natural teeth present. The presence of natural teeth is consistent with the trend of retaining natural teeth into old age. The retention of natural teeth has implications concerning the need for oral health care planning, the provision of effective daily oral health care and timely access to dental care for this client group. The majority of participants also indicated they visited the dentist only when they had an oral health problem, which usually related to pain. Given the evidence that poor patterns of dental care undermine the foundations of good oral health, these results reinforce the need for routine oral health assessment and dental referral for home care clients.

Following home care worker training and the implementation of daily oral care support, older people reported improvements in their oral health related quality of life. They also felt more confident with their own efforts to improve their oral health, especially cleaning their natural teeth and dentures. Furthermore, home care providers used the four key oral health processes as a quality mechanism to improve oral health care service delivery thus supporting the Home Care Common Standards and building better oral health connections in aged care.
Home care resources

Better oral health in home care

Developed for home care workers

This resource forms part of an integrated learning package based on five activities: better oral health care, dementia and oral care, understanding the mouth, care of natural teeth and care of dentures.

Each activity steps the learner through a series of learning outcomes which involve reading evidence-based information, watching an audio-visual resource and answering a reflective question work sheet.

The activities have a flexible delivery mode. They can be used as a self-learning resource, be facilitated by staff development educators or used in conjunction with the delivery of oral health training for a vocational training qualification such as Certificate III Aged Care or a nursing qualification.

Audio visual resources

The audio visual materials link with the reference resources and learning activities for home care workers. They consist of five vignettes.

1 Care workers – oral health heroes

This is a motivational resource highlighting the important role of home care workers in supporting and encouraging older people to maintain good oral health. It provides key oral health messages and tips for successful dental visits for clients.

(14 minutes)

2 Dementia and oral care

This is an instructional resource demonstrating how to encourage a person with dementia to participate in oral care. It breaks oral care into six simple steps.

(9 minutes)
It starts with the mouth

This is an animated resource demonstrating what happens in the mouth when food is eaten and describes the impact of an acid attack. It goes on to describe how saliva and fluoride protect natural teeth. It introduces the concept of 'tooth-friendly' eating, explains the simple six question oral health assessment tool and the importance of having a dental check-up.
(9 minutes)*

Care of natural teeth

This is an instructional resource demonstrating techniques used to clean another person's natural teeth. It explains the importance of oral health and its links to general health and provides key oral health messages.
(10 minutes)*

Care of dentures

This is an instructional resource demonstrating how to remove and clean dentures.
(5 minutes)*

*The series of instructional resources are considered useful for health workers in other settings such as disability, mental health and for looking after older people in the acute care sector.
Simple instructions are provided on how to maintain good oral health.

Bathroom prompts

These visual reminders are particularly useful for older people with memory impairment.
Promotional posters

A series of A3 sized posters were produced for displays and promotional activities.

For more information

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/OralHealthForOlderPeople

SA Dental Service
GPO Box 864
Adelaide SA 5001
+61 8 8222 8222
sadental@health.sa.gov.au