

# People affected by mental health at higher risk of poor dental outcomes

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Credit: University of Western Australia

Researchers from The University of Western Australia say more needs to be done to help improve the quality of dental health care for people who are affected by mental health issues.

In a study published this week in *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology*, which coincides with Mental Health Awareness Week (7-13 October), the researchers found many dental professionals in Perth did not feel adequately trained and equipped to best support patients with [mental health](#) conditions.

Researcher Professor Linda Slack-Smith from UWA Dental School said while evidence indicated people affected by mental health had poor oral

health outcomes, the team wanted to find out more about what the key challenges were and how dental professionals could better support patients.

The researchers carried out 16 interviews with a range of dental professionals across Perth.

"People living with mental health conditions face many challenges and we know that access to good quality dental health care is one of them," Professor Slack-Smith said.

"However through this study we wanted to delve more into the key issues and insights on what could be done to address this, by speaking directly to people at the core of dental health care that see and deal with these issues on a regular basis."

Professor Slack-Smith said dental professionals indicated there were many barriers to treating people with mental health conditions, including treating diseases that became advanced because treatment was not sought early and because of the limited capacity of some individuals to administer self-care, and an already over-burdened health system.

"The public health system is hugely stretched resource-wise," she said. "And the private health system, which employs over 85 per cent of dentists, is not always an option for people with limited resources.

"The costs of accessing dental care can be prohibitive for socially disadvantaged adults reliant on public dental care, and often incurs a fee, which is usually uncertain until treatment needs are ascertained. There are also long waiting lists."

Professor Slack-Smith said the dental professionals surveyed had indicated that to better support individuals the system had to change.

"Participants spoke about challenges of a system where the most vulnerable people, often with poor literacy, have to complete forms regarding eligibility and often complete them again the following year," she said

"If more people with [mental health conditions](#) are to access dental services, our evidence suggests that more flexibility is needed in how services are provided and more collaboration between mental health and dental professionals so that oral health becomes integral to primary health care.

"Clearly though, we need to support the dental professionals that treat these patients and provide systems that allow them to deliver the best possible care."

**More information:** Clair Scrine et al. Providing oral care for adults with mental health disorders: Dental professionals' perceptions and experiences in Perth, Western Australia, *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/cdoe.12427](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdoe.12427)

Provided by University of Western Australia

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