

Media release

3 August 2022

COVID-19 pandemic still impacting dental health with worst delays in public dental care seen this decade.




Waiting times for public dental care in Victoria continued to surge over the past 12 months as the impact of the pandemic continues to bite, according to new data released by the Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch (ADAVB) during Dental Health Week.

“There are more than 1.5 million Australian adults who are eligible to access public dental care in Victoria, but only 181,000 received care in the past 12 months – that’s only 12% of those eligible, and well down on the 220,000 that usually receive care each year,” ADAVB CEO A/Prof Matt Hopcraft said.




“Public dental waiting times have now increased on average to 26.7 months across Victoria, an increase of four months since the same time last year and the worst delays in care this decade. This average hides the dire story across the state, with many vulnerable patients forced to wait more than three years.”

Average wait times at selected clinics:

Melbourne

- Merri Health: 45.8 months  9.4 months
- North Richmond Community Health: 45.4 months  17.0 months
- IPC Health: 44.2 months  15.2 months

Regional Victoria

- Latrobe Community Health Service: 45.4 months  24.8 months
- Maryborough District Health Service: 44.1 months  4.6 months
- Bass Coast Health: 37.2 months  19.4 months

These numbers reflect the average waiting time for people as they come off the waiting list for care.

In the past 12 months, the number of people on the waiting list has decreased from 154,140 to 64,348, in large

part due to the contribution of the private sector through the use of vouchers. Whilst the ADAVB supported the one-off injection of funds to manage the backlog, we warned the Victorian Government that there was a need for a more sustainable funding increase, since previous experience shows that the waiting list numbers will grow quickly. In previous years, nearly 400,000 people were able to access dental care through the public system, but over the past 12 months this dropped to only 289,663 patients who received care (which doesn't include those seen in the private sector), largely as a result of government-imposed restrictions on access to dental care.

A/Prof Hopcraft said that while people wait years for dental care, their existing problems worsen and often lead to the need for emergency treatment. Last year nearly half of all courses of care in the public system were for emergencies rather than routine and preventive treatment.

"The ADAVB is calling on the state and federal governments to prioritise the importance of dental health by boosting funding to tackle waiting lists in the short term and providing a sustainable increase in funding in the long term to double the number of patients receiving care over the next five years. We are also concerned about issues relating to recruitment and retention of dentists. It is vital that the Victorian Government ensures that we have a strong public dental sector so that vulnerable Victorians can access necessary care."

The COVID-19 pandemic impact extends beyond the public sector, with all Victorians having had disrupted access to dental care over the past 2½ years.

"Dental practices in Victoria have been prevented from providing routine dental care during each of the lockdown periods since the pandemic began. In almost six of the last 18 months dental practices have been restricted to only providing urgent or emergency dental care," said ADAVB President Dr Warren Shnider.

"Patients have had to defer routine dental care, regular dental check-ups and preventive treatment, leading to a deterioration in their oral health. Dentists are still seeing many patients with escalated problems, that could have been managed in a conservative manner, progressing to more serious disease – for example tooth decay that could have been treated with a simple filling now needing root canal treatment or even extraction because their care has been delayed." Dr Shnider said.

"Dental practices continue to face challenges caused by the continuing pandemic with staff and patient illness

interrupting normal business activity. There is real concern for the mental health and well-being of all members of the dental team, who are reporting high levels of stress and burnout,” he said.

Oral health is fundamental to overall health, wellbeing, and quality of life, and a healthy mouth enables people to eat, speak and socialise without pain, discomfort or embarrassment. Dental diseases lead to pain, discomfort and tooth loss, and can lead to difficulties with chewing, swallowing and speech. Poor oral health can lead to problems with nutrition and general health, disruptions to sleep and productivity and can be a barrier to full participation in society including the ability to gain employment. There are also links between poor oral health and general diseases including Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Given the chronic and progressive nature of dental disease, the deferral of necessary dental care is likely to contribute to poorer oral health and long-term problems for many Victorians, and place greater pressure on public dental waiting lists and private dental practices and their staff. ADAVB is calling on both levels of government to work together to sustainably address the unacceptable public dental care wait times faced by Victorians, and to ensure that future COVID-19 lockdowns do not place unnecessary restrictions on access to necessary and essential dental care.

“It’s also important for people to prioritise their oral health,” said Dr Shnider. “If you have delayed your dental visit because of the pandemic, now is the time to make that appointment for a check-up. And following a few key things at home – brushing twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, cleaning in between teeth and reducing the amount of sugary foods and drinks can go a long way to keeping your smile healthy.”

Media enquiries

Interviews are available with ADAVB CEO A/Prof Matt Hopcraft on 0412 487 853 and President Dr Warren Shnider.

Contact

Sophia Ljaskevic, Communications & Marketing Manager

sophia.ljaskevic@adavb.org

Tel: 8825 4600

Mob: 0408 880 501

 @AusDentalVic

 @adavb @adavbceo

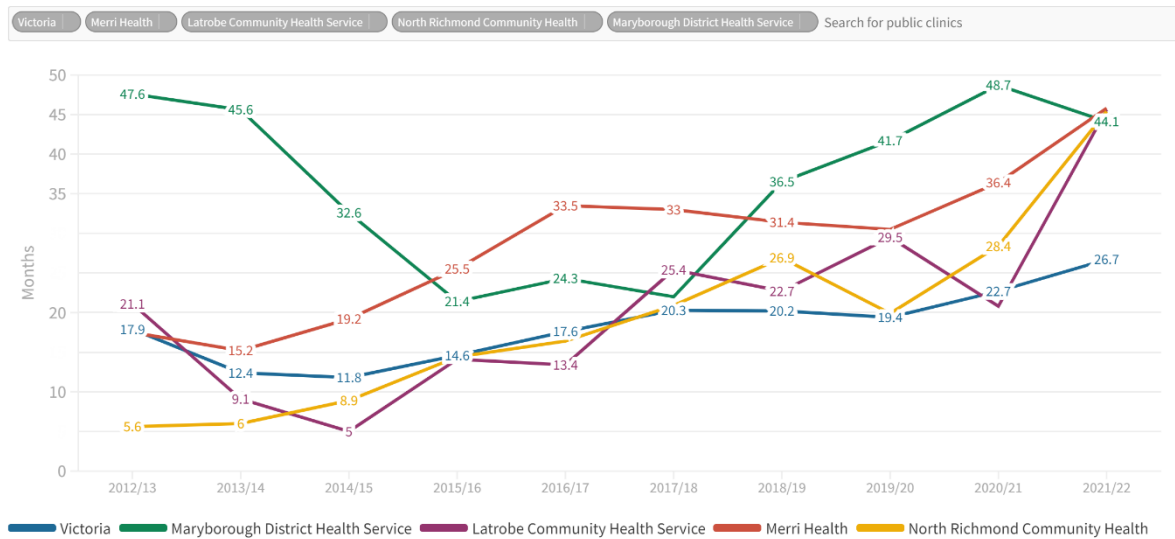
 Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch

 @AusDentalVic

More information

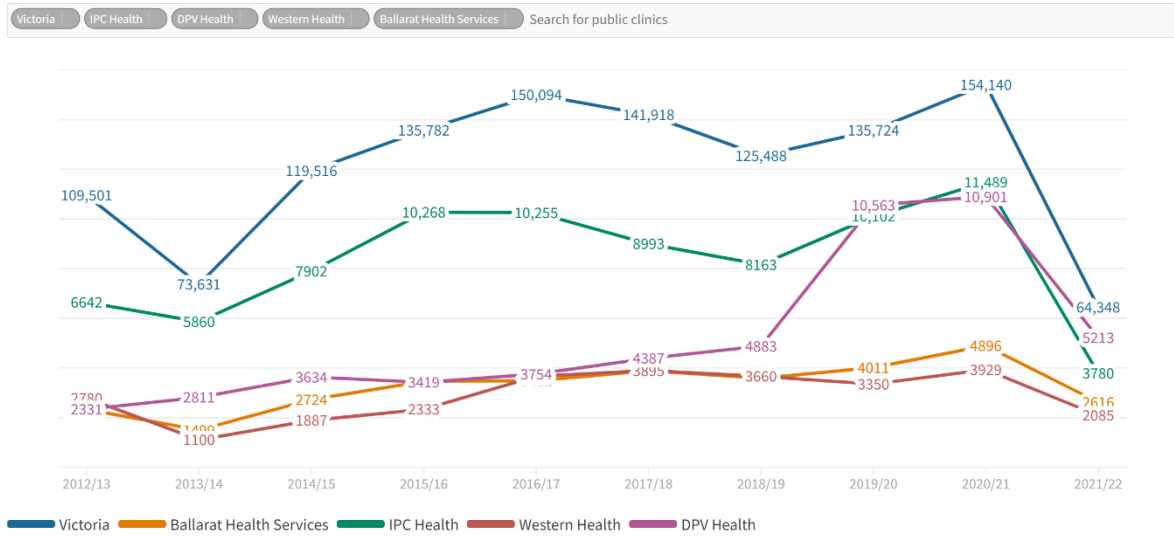
More information and detailed data for public dental waiting times is available at:
<https://adavb.org/advocacy/campaigns/public-dental-waiting-times>

Waiting times for general dental care in the Victorian public dental system to June 2022

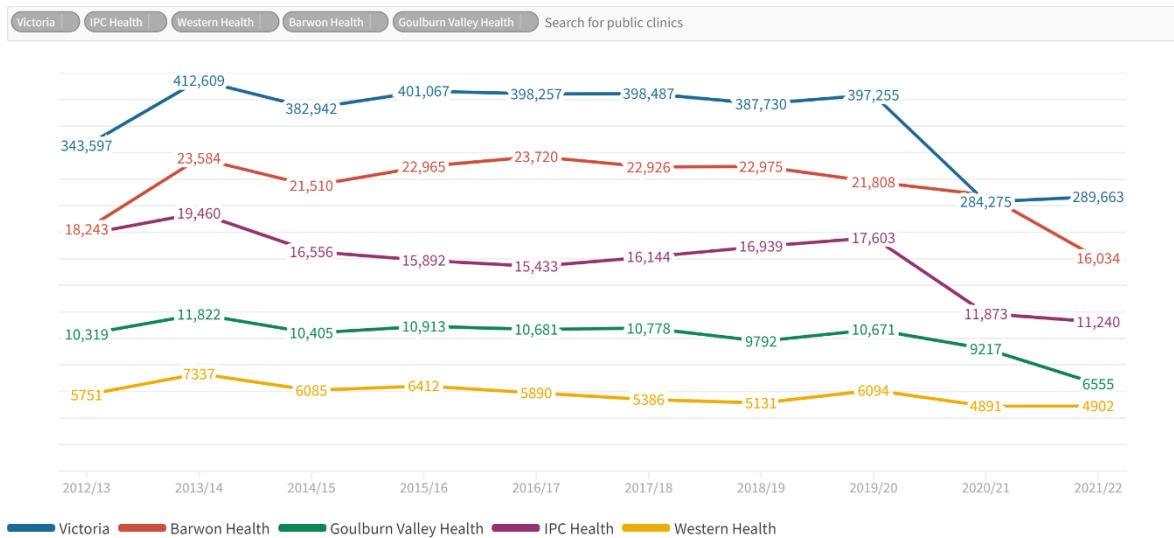


Source: adavb.org • Data obtained under Freedom of Information from Dental Health Services Victoria in January 2022 by the Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch Inc.

Patients waiting for general dental care in the Victorian public dental system to June 2022



Patients treated in the public dental system in Victoria to June 2022

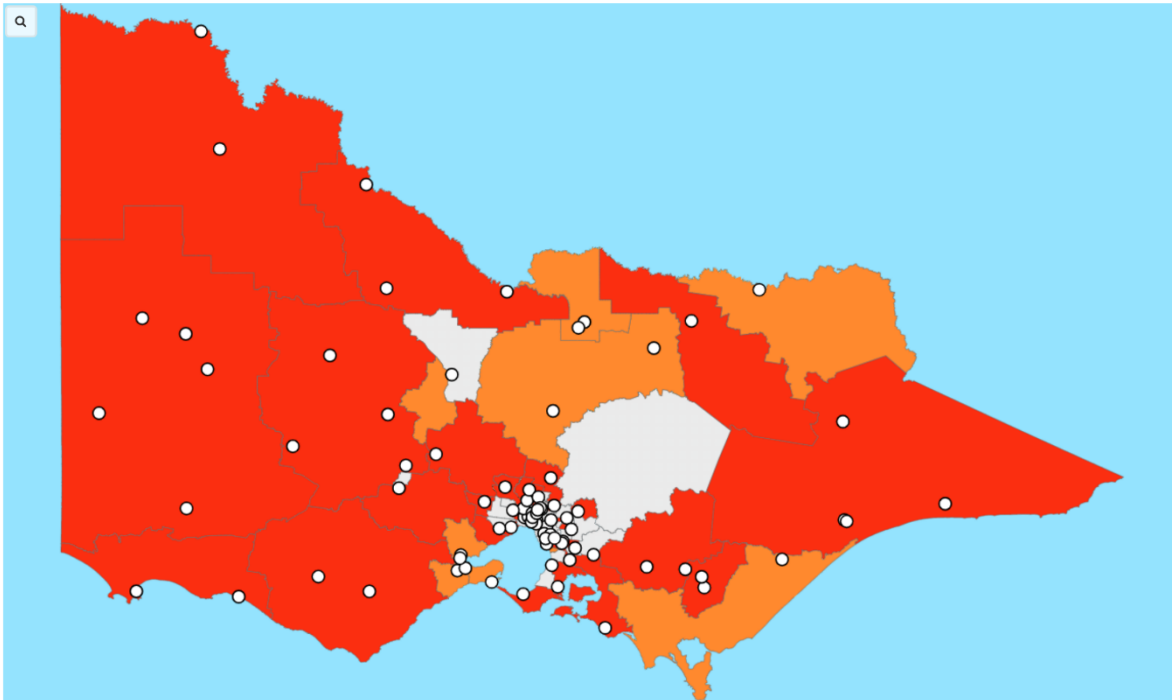


Public dental data by state electorate - June 2022

Hover over circles for information on public dental clinics.



Average waiting time (general dental care)  10 12 24 50



Source: adavb.org • Data obtained under Freedom of Information from Dental Health Services Victoria in January 2022 by the Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch Inc.