

Media release

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Drop in waiting times for public dental care, but concerns remain over long-term access.

Waiting times for public dental treatment dropped to an average 16.5 months in December 2022 as a result of a one-off injection of funds, however concerns remain about ongoing access to dental care for more than 1.5 million eligible Victorians.

“These are the lowest waiting times to access public dental care in Victoria since 2016/17, which comes off the back of ongoing advocacy from the ADAVB to increase funding,” said ADAVB President A/Prof Warren Shnider. “However, waiting more than 12 months is still unacceptable for patients with significant treatment needs.”

The Victorian Government provided \$27 million last year to target waiting lists after the delays in accessing care imposed by government restrictions, which had seen the waiting time blow out to 26.7 months in June 2022. This additional funding has helped to remove a large number of patients from the waiting list, but concerns remain about the ability of eligible patients to access care given the chronic underfunding of public dentistry. “History tells us that these one-off injections of cash only offer short term relief, and without a more sustainable approach, we know that waiting times will rapidly increase,” said A/Prof Shnider.

Treatment activity appears to be returning to normal levels, with 205,516 people treated from June – December 2022 (including 124,766 adult patients). However, this is still only a small fraction of the 1.5 million adults who are eligible to access dental care. While people wait for dental care, their existing problems worsen and often lead to the need for emergency treatment. Over the past 6 months around one third of all courses of care in the public system were for emergencies rather than routine and preventive treatment.

The data also highlights significant issues with the public dental workforce, with the number of clinicians declining by 21.6 FTE staff over the past 6 months, representing 6% of the workforce. “We have raised concerns during stalled enterprise bargaining negotiations last year about issues relating to recruitment and retention of dentists. It is vital that the Victorian Government addresses these workforce issues as a matter of urgency to ensure that we have a strong public dental sector so that vulnerable Victorians can access necessary care.”

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.

“It’s also important for people to prioritise their oral health,” said A/Prof 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.”

Average wait times at selected clinics:

Melbourne

- North Richmond Community Health: 40.6 months ↓ 4.8 months
- Merri Health: 29.6 months ↓ 16.2 months
- Banyule Community Health: 25.8 months ↓ 7.5 months

Regional Victoria

- South West Healthcare: 33.5 months ↑ 0.7 months
- Latrobe Community Health Service: 30.4 months ↓ 15.2 months
- Sunraysia Community Health: 27.1 months ↓ 3.2 months

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

Media enquiries

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

More information

More information and detailed data for public dental waiting times is available at:

<https://adavb.org/advocacy/campaigns/public-dental-waiting-times>

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