

# Integrated primary health care key to oral health improvement in rural and remote Australia

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Access to oral health care for rural and remote Australians is limited, particularly for underserved populations that rely on public dental services. This includes First Nations Peoples. This is largely due to poor distribution of oral health services and a limited dental workforce supply in these areas.

Released today by AHHA's [Deeble Institute for Health Policy Research](#), the Issues Brief '[Integrating oral health into primary healthcare for improved access to oral health care for rural and remote populations](#)' synthesises evidence about the extent of access challenges in rural and remote Australia. The Brief has been co-authored by 2024 Deeble Scholar Dr Prabhakar Veginadu, Research Fellow at the Menzies School of Health Research, Northern Territory.

'Primary care providers are often the first point of contact for health services in rural and remote communities, and are well positioned to provide basic oral health care,' continued Ms Woolcock.

'This could include screening for risk factors, oral health education, provision of non-invasive preventative interventions, and referral.'

'However, limited oral health knowledge and skills and boundaries to professional scopes of practice curb the possibility of leveraging existing primary healthcare resources for oral health care provision.'

'Accessing oral health care anywhere in Australia is also likely to incur out-of-pocket costs, as these services are not generally covered by Medicare.'

'This is also the case when accessing the limited non-government oral health services in these areas. This Brief recommends subsidy schemes based on the fee-for-service payment model, directed at specific population groups in rural and remote areas, to ensure timely access to this much-needed care.'

'This Brief also highlights the missed opportunities for interprofessional collaboration and interoperability of oral and primary healthcare professionals, as there are no mandated data reporting, management, and sharing mechanisms between dental and broader healthcare systems.'

Other key recommendations of this Issues Brief include improving health training for rural and remote primary healthcare professionals, allowing primary healthcare professionals to include oral health care in their scope of practice, identifying oral health as a 'core' primary healthcare service, increasing interoperability and data sharing, and improving access to oral health care under Medicare for rural and remote populations.

'In rural and remote areas, integrating oral health into primary healthcare is an effective and efficient strategy to improve access to oral health care. Providing access to more timely and preventative oral health care, could also help to reduce potentially preventable hospitalisations, avoiding more invasive, painful and expensive procedures for patients and unnecessary costs to the system.'

The Deeble Scholarship is supported by [HESTA](#).

The online version of this [media release](#) can be found on the AHHA website. **The Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association (AHHA) is the independent peak membership body and advocate for the Australian healthcare system and a national voice for universally accessible, high-quality healthcare in Australia.**

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