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All smiles as early childhood dental health initiative gets underway

An initiative aimed at improving the long-term health outcomes of young children in the Central Great Southern region of WA by improving their dental health commenced in March 2023.

The Central Great Southern – Child Health Project (Dental Health and Food Security) program provides dental screening, preventive dental treatment and referrals for children aged 0-4 years of age.

The dental screening is undertaken by paediatric dental specialist, Dr Jilen Patel and dental students from The University of Western Australia.

The program has been made possible via the Early Years Partnership, a 10-year partnership between the State Government (Departments of Communities, Health and Education) and Minderoo Foundation, with funding primarily sourced from Minderoo Foundation and Rural Health West.

During the inaugural visit held 13-18 March, 183 children were screened at local day care centres, primary schools, playgrounds and community meeting places.

Central Great Southern Early Years Partnership Local Working Party Co-Chair Jo Webb said good oral health can have a significant long term positive impact on the health and wellbeing of children.

“Locally, the rate of 0-4 year olds hospitalised for oral disease is 2.85 times higher than the WA average and a high rate of early childhood caries have been observed by people working with young children in our community.

“Conversely, none of our local dentists specialise in paediatric dental care. This project helps close the gap between local needs and available care.”

Under the project, the dental team will visit Central Great Southern communities three times this year and has funding for 18 months.

These communities have been selected due to their high migrant population with at least 50 language groups residing in the area, and up to 60% of local primary school students using English as a second language. Around 12% of the population also identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The majority of the children seen during the initial visit had not previously seen a dentist. The program not only enabled dental checks but allowed the families to ask questions around dental health, tooth-brushing, nutrition and dental development.

The dental team is trialling the use of tele-dentistry by taking photos of the teeth of participating children on a purpose-built app to help plan and coordinate treatment. It is hoped this will provide an effective method of early identification of dental issues.

At the next visit, the team will also train local health staff and families in taking photos for ongoing review, which will help build local capacity and pave the way for the program to become a long-term, sustainable service.

“We’ve received some wonderful feedback from local families following the first visit; which is testament to the collaborative effort that has gone into creating a service that meets the unique needs of this community.

“Jilen’s enthusiasm and passion for this program has been pivotal. Not only has his passion made the program possible, his manner with the children made them and their families very comfortable during the screening process.

“He was willing to see children as they played; on slides, on playground equipment; performing magic tricks to help put them at ease.”

In addition to the screening, the team addressed minor dental issues, such as applying fluoride treatments and sealing deep grooves in teeth at risk of developing decay. These procedures were undertaken in parks, playgrounds or in the Katanning Primary School dental clinic, which was made accessible thanks to the Department of Education and the School Dental Service.

The participating dental students also benefited from their involvement through gaining experience with the 0-4 age group, seeing a variety of dental health conditions, as well as gaining exposure to rural practice and the sense of community in country WA.

Rural Health West Deputy CEO Kelli Porter said many rural communities across Western Australia experienced issues accessing dental care.

“As with many other health professions, rural WA has a shortage of appropriately qualified dentists. However, unlike medicine, nursing and allied health, there are few opportunities for dental students to gain exposure to working in a country town.

“We are extremely pleased to be a partner in this initiative – not just for the benefit of the children and families, but also for the participating students who have gained invaluable practical and social experience in these wonderful communities.”

The project also encompassed health promotion aimed at addressing food insecurity issues within the community.

“Anecdotally, food insecurity is an issue for many local families. The past few years have been particularly tough, with many families feeling the impact of inflation on the cost of fresh produce and other groceries,” Jo said.

“The health promotion aspect of this program aims to help families develop a better understanding of nutrition and dental health.

“Overall, the program has been the result of excellent collaboration between many local organisations and our metropolitan partners.”

Families were supported to attend the program by community connectors from Badgebup Aboriginal Corporation, WA Country Health Service Great Southern including Great Southern Aboriginal Health and the Primary and Population Health teams, Smart Start Great Southern and South West Aboriginal Medicine Service.

Dr Asheen Behari from Kojonup Dentist kindly donated toothbrushes and toothpaste for children screened under the program.

The initiative is also supported by Telethon Kids Institute and Amity Health.

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Rural Health West aims to improve access to quality healthcare for rural communities through the provision of a highly skilled, motivated and sustainable medical and allied health workforce. We are a not-for-profit organisation primarily funded through the WA Country Health Service and the Australian Government Department of Health.