

NSW

Dentist

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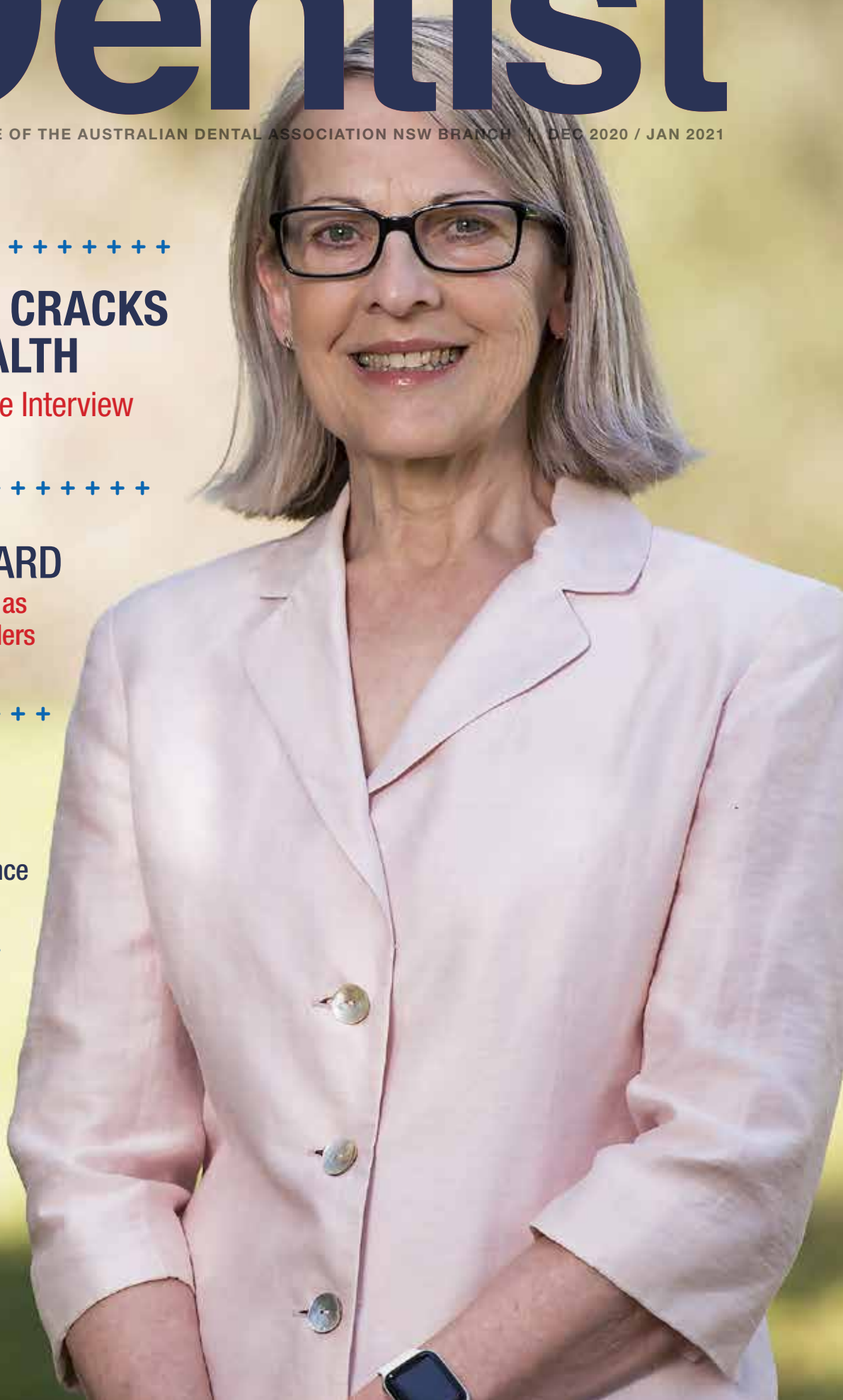
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ADA NSW Media Advisor **Stuart Turner** investigates how one project is helping improve oral health for older Australians.

Filling the Cracks in Oral Health

After “falling” into oral health as a career, Associate Professor Janet Wallace is now ensuring vulnerable, elderly patients don’t fall through the cracks when it comes to accessing dental treatment.

A/Prof Wallace’s varied career path in oral health has included roles as a dental assistant, dental therapist, oral health therapist, public sector oral health management and in academia.

The last decade has seen her develop and oversee Senior Smiles, which provides preventive oral health care, oral health assessments and referrals for dental treatment for vulnerable, elderly residents living in Residential Aged Care Facilities (RACFs).

With the ongoing Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety recently hearing proposals for a nationwide rollout of similar schemes, A/Prof Wallace hopes the long standing ‘unacceptable’ neglect of older Australians’ oral care may soon end.

“I remember once talking to someone who found it shocking that their family member receiving care in an RACF was not having their oral health needs met,” A/Prof Wallace said. “People in aged care facilities should have access to all services they would have in the community, including access to daily oral health hygiene care.

“We know that when people enter aged care their oral health deteriorates. It’s unacceptable and we must address it.”

A registered Oral Health Therapist with qualifications in dental therapy, dental hygiene, business management, tertiary teaching and a PhD in Oral Health, A/Prof

Wallace has worked in both private and public dental practice and management and had director roles with various dental health community service teams.

After joining the University of Newcastle’s Discipline of Oral Health program in 2008, A/Prof Wallace developed the pilot Senior Smiles project, an equitable model of preventive care and triage system to meet oral health care needs of residents in aged care facilities.

Senior Smiles provides preventive oral health care on-site in the facility and timely referral pathways to dentists and dental prosthetists to help patients receive complex dental care when needed.

Initially, the scheme saw final year undergraduate oral health students provide preventive care for residents in local residential aged care facilities.

“It was clear that if there wasn’t someone ‘on site’ providing oral hygiene care or dental treatment, residents’ oral health suffered,” A/Prof Wallace said. “The students were encountering residents suffering weeks of facial swelling, mouthfuls of ulcers and other undetected oral health problems.

“Staff in care homes are transient and oral health can fall off the radar. Many residents also have cognitive impairment and complex oral health needs which require the expertise of a dental practitioner to instigate dental health management and treatment.

“I feel it’s our responsibility as health professionals that if you see a need for something to be addressed for patients’ benefit, you must try to provide care. I also wanted to show there is a model which provides both oral health prevention and referral pathways to community dentistry in an equitable way.”

With assistance from a philanthropic grant of \$540,000 from the Elderslee Foundation, the program was extended and saw registered dental hygienists and oral health therapists placed in five RACFs on the NSW Central Coast. They provided oral health risk assessments, oral health care plans, oral health education and developed referral pathways to community dentists and dental prosthetists for residents who required more complex dental care.

“It can be confronting and challenging for the dental professionals involved,” A/Prof Wallace said. “It takes time to integrate into the residential aged care facility environment, but the practitioners have found it extremely rewarding.

“Once the practitioner is integrated into the facilities, staff would come to them saying, ‘Mrs Smith isn’t eating, could you look at her mouth’. Also, facility staff themselves also became interested in their oral health, so there were additional benefits.

“Unless dental professionals become part of the aged care facility, we won’t be doing anything other than providing a relief of pain service for the residents. Senior Smiles is a prevention-focused program and it also provides education for the staff and importantly it also develops referral

pathways into the wider community for residents to see a dentist or dental prosthetist. This is really important to making sure the residents keep receiving regular and timely dental treatment.”

Senior Smiles can also pay its way economically. A cost-benefit analysis by the UK-based Kent Surrey Sussex Academic Health Science Network showed that the program’s benefits included better oral health, improved nutrition, lower risk of pneumonia, fewer GP visits for patients and reduced hospital admissions. The analysis found that, in monetary terms, Senior Smiles could deliver an estimated \$2.40 benefits to the healthcare system and a further \$3.18 in social benefits for every \$1 invested if it was rolled out more widely.

Both A/Prof Wallace and ADA NSW President Dr Kathleen Matthews gave evidence to the ongoing Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety earlier this year, highlighting the urgent need to improve oral care for older Australians.

Proposals from Counsel Assisting the Commission for possible inclusion in its final report early next year included expanding outreach services such as Senior Smiles across the country.

“Getting oral health on the Commission’s agenda was a win,”



A/Prof Janet Wallace created Senior Smiles to help address oral health needs of older Australians.

A/Prof Wallace said. “I was ecstatic to give evidence, even if it was slightly nerve-racking.

“It’s an honour as a healthcare professional to make a difference, provide oral health care and ultimately relieve pain. Seeing key stakeholders collaborating on behalf of vulnerable patients is also terrific.

“My ultimate dream is to see residential aged care facilities across Australia receive funding to employ an oral health therapist or dental hygienist as part of the facility staff to ensure oral hygiene care is on the

daily cares list and so that referral pathways to community dentists and dental prosthetists are established for all residents.

“I’ve spent 10 years of my life working on this preventive oral health program and it’s become a huge passion. It’s been hard work at times, but I don’t intend to give up.”

For more information on Senior Smiles, visit www.newcastle.edu.au/research/stories/research-impact/oral-health-program-seniors

What did the recent proposals for the Royal Commission Into Aged Care Quality and Safety recommend for oral health?

- The Australian Government should establish a new Seniors Dental Benefits Scheme to fund dental services for people in aged care or who live in the community and receive the age pension or qualify for the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card.
- Consider implementing outreach programs such as Senior Smiles across Australia to best help older Australians in RACFs and receiving care have their oral health needs met.

Why is this such a big issue?

- Poor oral health for our older Australians has been estimated to cost \$750m a year and can contribute to other serious conditions.
- As ADA NSW highlighted in its submission to the Commission, access to appropriate oral health

care services is not a privilege but a basic human right. However, this is not the case for a large proportion of the older adult Australian population, who (in many cases) are going without oral health care.

What happens now?

- The proposals will be considered by the Commission ahead of its final report in February, which will include a series of recommendations to improve aged care for older Australians.
- ADA NSW has written a joint letter with other key stakeholders welcoming the proposals but calling for the further input of dental practitioners in their implementation.

How ADA NSW has advocated to improve oral health for older Australians in care

- United with key stakeholders on multiple submissions to the Commission, highlighting the

economic and social cost of poor oral health for older Australians.

- President Dr Kathleen Matthews was invited to give evidence to the Royal Commission’s public hearings earlier this year, outlining the need for a transformation in older Australians’ oral health.
- After recent proposals by Counsel Assisting ahead of the Commission’s final report (expected in early 2021), ADA NSW has partnered with several key stakeholders on a further submission.

How members can help advocacy in this area:

- Familiarise yourself with ADA NSW’s initial submission at www.adansw.com.au
- Support the issue via your personal social media channels and raise awareness of the issue with any patients seeking assistance, either from themselves or family members.