

"It's not just
about teeth"

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Australasian Therapeutic Communities Association
Conference 2023

Palmerston
Improving your wellbeing



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME
A U S T R A L I A



St Pat's
St Patrick's Community
Support Centre



Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and the Whadjuk people, where Palmerston operates.

We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and region.

**Sovereignty has never been ceded.
It always was and always will be, Aboriginal Land.**

In 2020 Palmerston commissioned local Aboriginal artists Deborah Newenham and Melissa Spillman from Yirra Kurl to depict 40 years of Palmerston serving our local community. Elements of the artwork have been included in this presentation.



About Us

Palmerston is a leading and respected not for profit organisation supporting individuals, families and communities in WA since 1980.

Palmerston offers individual, group counselling, family support, residential rehabilitation and educational initiatives in the community.

We operate from 13 locations throughout the metro, Great Southern and South West of WA, including two Therapeutic Communities.



WHY THIS PILOT PROJECT?

Oral health is fundamental to overall health, wellbeing, quality of life

Low awareness of AOD impacts on teeth

Enables people to eat, speak, socialise without pain, discomfort, embarrassment

Co-occurring risk factors (e.g., tobacco)

We wanted to address this and explore the difference a healthy smile might make to long-term recovery outcomes

Financial barriers to dental treatment

Shame, stigma, fear of judgement

Many clients report dental pain, or embarrassment regarding their smile, often covering their mouths when they talk

WHY THIS PILOT PROJECT?

Evidence of 'what works' is limited:

- Published studies mostly describe poor oral health and barriers to dental care for people with AOD dependence
- Impact on retention in AOD rehab & synergies with recovery have NOT been looked at previously



Increasingly funders want innovation that is evidence-based



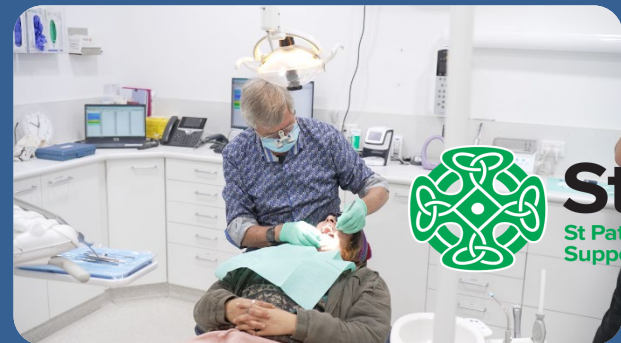
→ chicken & egg conundrum

→ Sometimes need to build the evidence first

→ so we just got on with it, with evaluation embedded

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE ORAL HEALTH PROJECT?

- Since June 2022, all residents at the Farm (TC) are offered the opportunity to receive **no cost dental care**
 - Very high uptake (~ 80% of residents opt to participate)
- Weekly clinics run at St Pats (Fremantle) which has an established oral health clinic for people on no/low income
- Residents travel as a group by bus, accompanied by a Palmerston staff member
- Dental assessment and treatment is provided by retired dentist Dr Slattery, supported by a dental nurse provided by St Pats
- Residents complete a pre-treatment survey for the evaluation, and one at completion of their series of treatments



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KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

WHO HAS BEEN SUPPORTED?



56
residents



21 – 67
Age range



38
Clinics



20%
Aboriginal
and/or Torres
Strait Islander
people

June 2022-June 2023

“When I’m in addiction [dental treatment] goes on the back burner. I’ve been in addiction on and off for 30 years... I’ve had a lot of clean time. In that time, I’ve maintained my dental health, but never had the full funds to be able to go and actually get it done because I’ve never had private health insurance. Foodwise I can’t eat 60 per cent of foods basically.”

“My teeth had just snapped off leaving brown stumps. I was left with about six or seven teeth when I had them all pulled. From then on then I had nothing for two years”

TREATMENTS PROVIDED (@ 38 clinics sessions)

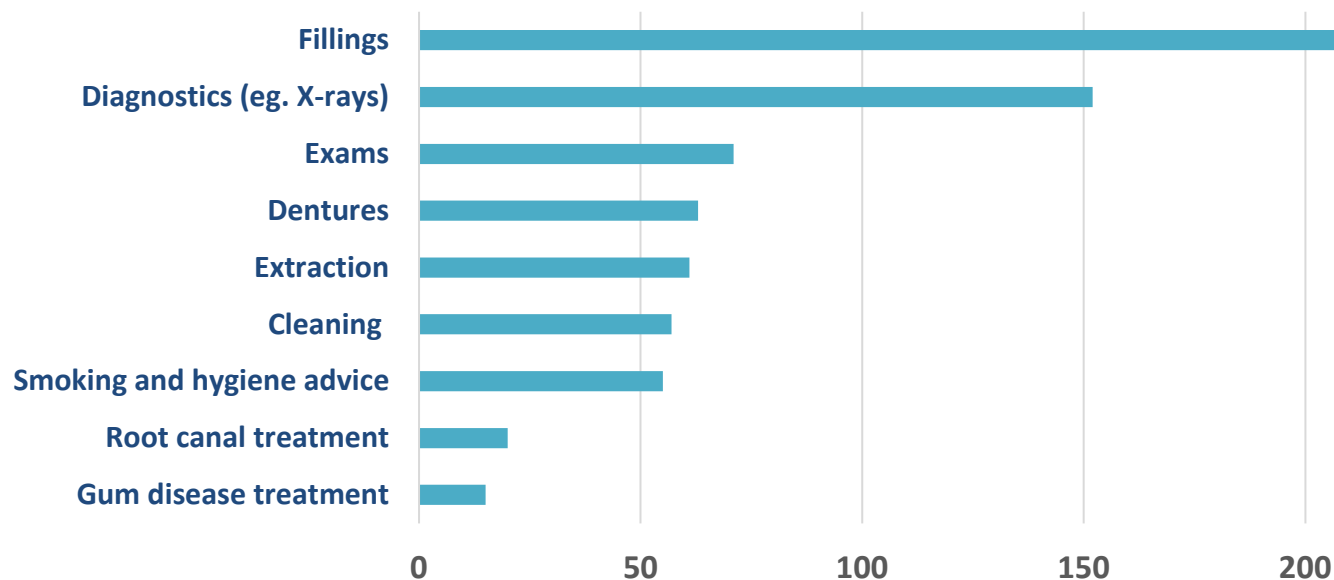


**56 individuals
received treatment**



**3-4 average clinic appointments
per person
(ranged from 1-9 appointments)**

Number of Treatments



“Typically, multiple appointment ‘tooth-saving’ treatments, like root canal therapy vs extraction, are cost prohibitive for low-income patients. Tooth extracting is much more common in public dental clinics purely because cost is such an issue. By contrast, many of these Palmerston residents have benefitted from tooth repair and saving of teeth”

Dr Jack Hawkesford, Dentist

BENEFITS – 3 KEY THEMES



Health

- Oral health (less pain, able to eat, restored smile etc.)
- Overall health (inter-related health issues, self-care)



Quality of life

- Hope for the future, confidence and self-esteem, speech and talking, confidence in appearance, future employment



AOD recovery

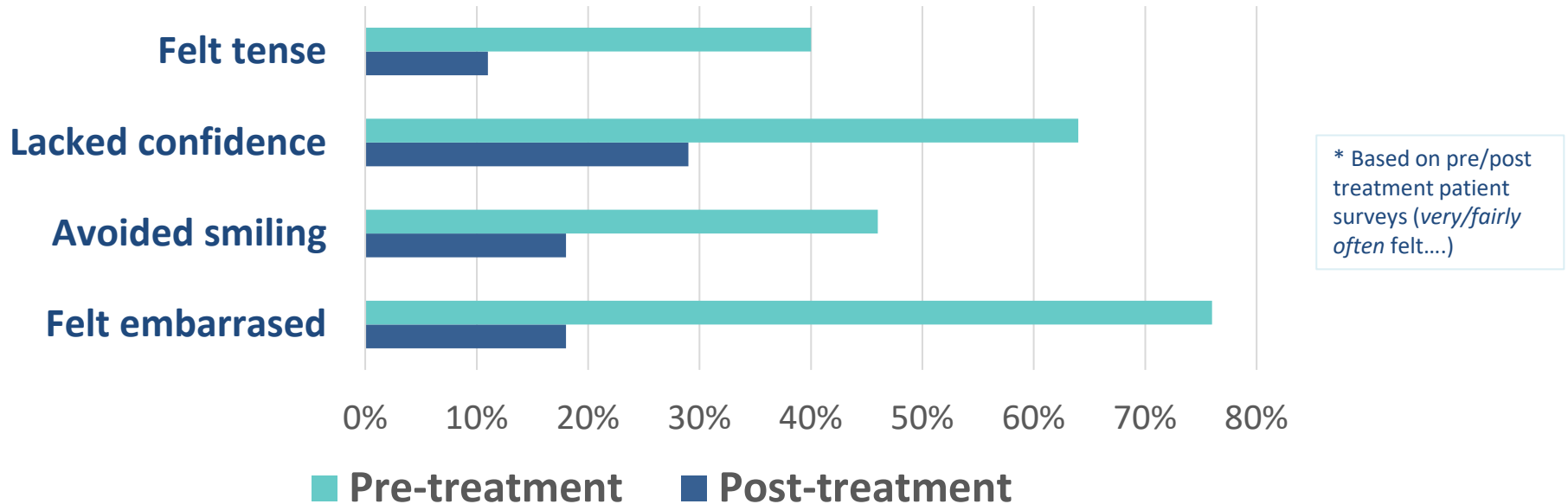
- Reinforcement of AOD recovery, engagement in rehabilitation, power of group support



Oral Health Impact



Because of the state of your teeth/mouth, how often have you* ?



“Once your teeth get to that stage, there is embarrassment going to see a professional for it. They fear they are going to be judged and they don't want to be. Everyone is judging them anyway. They've got an anxiety about it.”
Dr Slattery, Project Dentist

“When I'd look in the mirror at my teeth, I'd look at myself and it's just like, what have you done, where has your life gone? Now I'm smiling, I'm taking selfies.” – resident

Confidence & Self Esteem

"I hadn't looked in the mirror for a long time. I'd go months and months and months without even looking at a mirror. I caught myself in the mirror the other day and I'm starting to like what I see in the mirror." – resident



"When you sort out that smile on people – whether it's false teeth or replacing awful old fillings or just getting rid of stains – a light develops behind their eyes... And now they talk to you, they look at you. There's a guy at the moment that normally holds his hand in front of his mouth. And now he just smiles a lot more."


Dr Slattery, Project Dentist

Supporting AOD Recovery

“It fits with the culture of moving forward in life and having things that may have held you back from before, now it’s been fixed. It’s one more reason to keep going. If you’re going to be helping people in a therapeutic community to fix their lives, you’ve got to fix all the aspects of their lives, because you can’t leave a reason to fall back into old ways”

“If you know for a fact that, through your drug use, that you’ve done damage to your teeth. Then you’re getting it addressed and fixed, it’s another reason to not go back to using. A visible reason. It’s a massive part of people not going back to how things were”

“To start something and see it through, and finish it, just reinforces that I am more capable than I probably give myself credit for. It’s a nice feeling – that I’m getting stuff done that’s for me. It’s been good for my soul, good for my head.”



[quotes from resident interviews
with evaluation team]

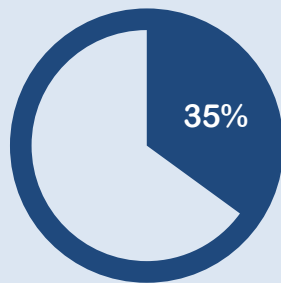
Impact on duration in recovery

The average duration of recovery stay at The Farm*

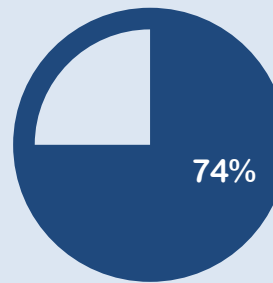
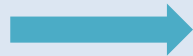
>19 weeks for those who received dental treatment

versus 14 weeks for those who did not get dental treatment

How likely were people to stay at The Farm >12 weeks if they had dental treatment?



No Dental Treatment



Dental Treatment

***Data based on:**

- 56 people who received dental treatment (10 had 2 stays)
- 17 people who left before dental treatment commenced

“I’ve seen a lot of success stories come out of this dental program. I think it’s something that gets people committed to the rehab program, because they know that there’s an incentive for them to stick around.” –resident

*“It has made me want to stay here longer than what I would have otherwise. It gives me extra incentive to work on myself.”
–resident*

Looking to the Future – Recovery Capital

“It makes a big difference, especially when it comes to going to a job interview. If they see you're hiding your mouth or not showing confidence they're more than likely not going to give you the job. Because my teeth are better, I can be confident. I know I've got nothing to hide now.”

“I haven't had a relationship for 20 years so to think about meeting someone now, not having your own teeth, it is a big deal. To have that confidence to move forward. I haven't had hope for a long time.”

“It's the confidence with other parents and schools and kids talking about ‘your dad has got no teeth.’ For future, with going to school and attending assemblies and talking with other parents, I want to be on top of it and I'm glad and grateful that this opportunity is here.”

People behind the statistics are the most compelling evidence....



Scan QR code to take you to short 2-minute video of interviews with the project Dentist and two now smiling participants.



To sum up:

Critical Success Factors – top 10



Trauma informed



Therapeutic Group context



Not just about teeth



Generosity ethos



Collaborative partnership



Low barrier/cost access to dental care



Co-design & client feedback



Enhancing engagement in AOD recovery



Consideration of other health issues



Embedded evaluation and learning culture

To sum up: How this fits with the ‘bigger picture’

1

This **small scale pilot project** is ‘getting on with it’ ; addressing a long known issue in AOD sector, to deliver something transformational at low cost but high added value.

Our sector can play a role in ‘**proof of concept**’

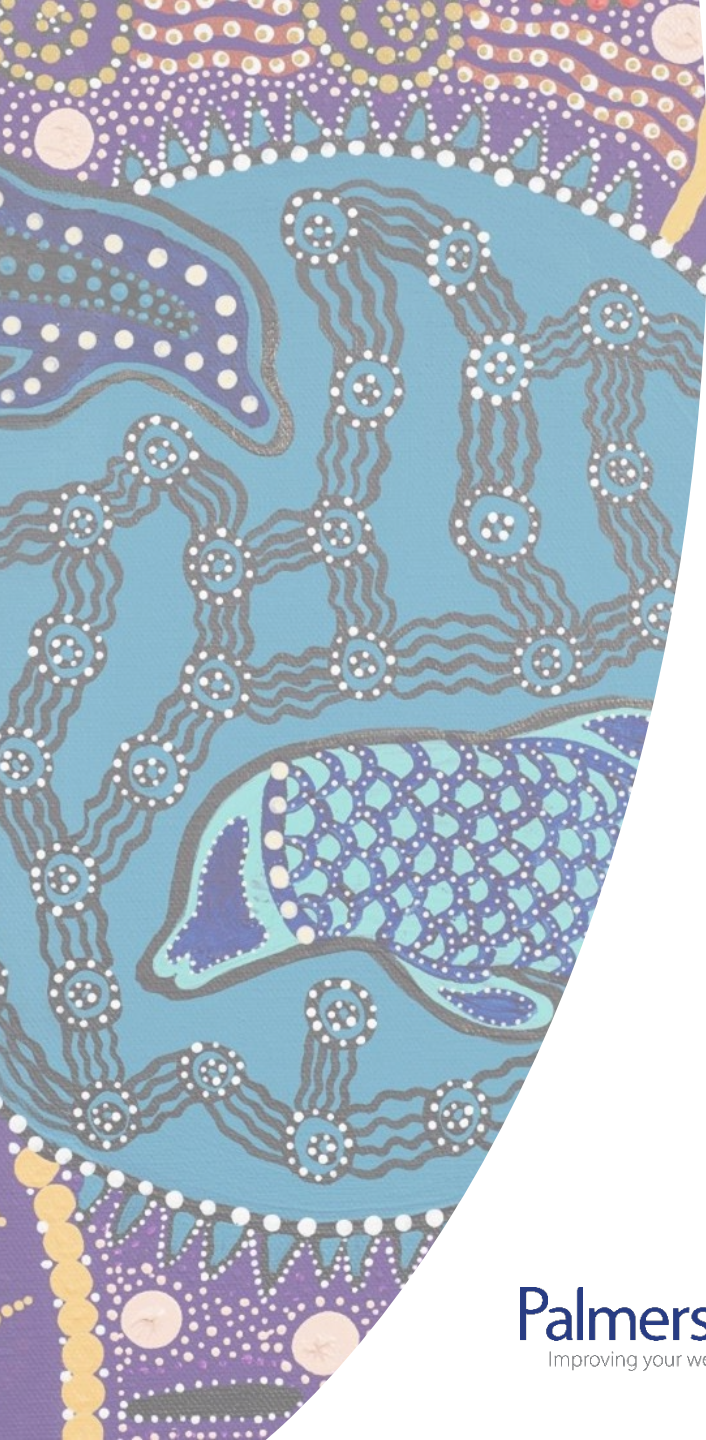
2

From little things, big things grow; year 1 evaluation report provided to Federal Senate inquiry* on access to dental care – people with AOD dependence had not been identified in the interim report as a priority group

3

This is simple – but hard - Recovery is a longitudinal journey and every person’s journey is different. From a holistic service perspective, we need to focus on the ‘small’ things (‘barriers to employment’) as well as the notable ‘big things’ (i.e. employment) which make a profound impact on our clients lives. It’s simple, but hard

* Commonwealth of Australia. The Senate Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia. Published 2023.



And to conclude in the words of one of our residents

“It is not just about teeth.

It’s about mental health, confidence, self-esteem, and hope. It’s a massive part of recovery”



Scan here for full Evaluation Report