

# EVALUATION OF THE PALMERSTON ORAL HEALTH PROGRAM

## Findings from the First Two Years of Operation

### THE ORAL HEALTH PROGRAM

The Palmerston Oral Health Program is a novel service offered to residents at 'The Farm', a residential AOD rehabilitation program on the outskirts of Perth.

The program was instigated in mid 2021 as is a collaboration between Palmerston Association, a major not-for-profit provider of AOD services in Western Australia (WA) and St Patrick's Community Support Centre (St Pat's), a homelessness service in Fremantle that has a fully equipped dental clinic that hosts a clinic for residents from The Farm each week. The dental care is provided voluntarily by a retired highly experienced dentist, assisted by a St Pat's dental nurse.

The program was co-designed with involvement of residents from The Farm, the program dentist and Palmerston staff. Residents were also involved in the development of the evaluation, which has been undertaken by researchers from the Institute for Health Research at the University of Notre Dame.

### Overall Program Aim

To improve access to dental treatment and remove barriers to oral health promotion for residents in Alcohol and Other drugs (AOD) recovery.

*"It is not just about teeth. It's about mental health, confidence, self-esteem, and hope. It's a massive part of recovery."*

- Palmerston Farm Resident



*"Oral health is fundamental to overall health, wellbeing, and quality of life. A healthy mouth enables people to eat without pain, discomfort, or embarrassment. Many of our clients report dental pain, or embarrassment regarding their smile, often covering their mouths when they talk. This program was set up to address this and explore the difference a healthy smile might make to long-term recovery outcomes."*

- Emma Jarvis, Palmerston CEO

*"Something like this is essential for recovery. In active addition you lose sight of your own health, selfcare, all that sort of stuff. So, to be actively participating in selfcare, it's hand in hand with recovery."*

- Palmerston Farm Resident

### Why integrate dental treatment into an AOD setting?



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



Trauma & prior negative experiences of dental treatment



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



AOD use exacerbates poor oral health



Financial barriers to dental treatment



Poor oral health associated with shame & stigma



Confidence & self-worth affected by missing teeth



Low awareness of AOD impacts on teeth

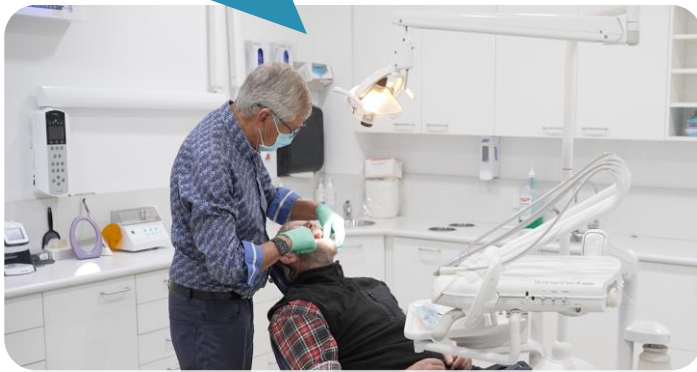
## Delivery of the Program

All residents at The Farm are offered the opportunity to receive no cost dental care.

The dental clinics are held weekly at St Pat's, with residents travelling together by bus to attend. A total of 64 clinic dates were held from 1st June 2022 to 31st May 2024.

*"A lot [of Palmerston Farm residents] just have treatment when they're sore, and there's nothing else they can do about it. So, to get restorative and even preventative treatment done gives us a whole new feel to them."*

– Dr Slattery



## Demographics



**PEOPLE SUPPORTED**



**AGE RANGE**



**AVERAGE AGE**



**31%**  
**FEMALE**



**69%**  
**MALE**



**20%**  
**ABORIGINAL**

## Dental Clinic stats



**64** **CLINICS**



**323** **APPOINTMENTS ATTENDED**



**5** **PEOPLE PER CLINIC ON AVERAGE**



**4** **APPOINTMENTS ON AVERAGE PER RESIDENT**

## Scope



Undertake assessments of dental needs of Palmerston Farm TC residents



Develop dental treatment plans



Increase resident awareness of dental hygiene and effect of AOD use



Provide dental care that includes physical as well as improving appearance of teeth



Ensure dental treatment is trauma-informed

**Tooth extraction**  
31 people  
(38% of cohort)

**Fillings** 60 people  
(74% of cohort)

**Gum disease**  
5 people  
(6% of cohort)

**Main types of dental treatment**

**In-depth health advice**  
52 people  
(64% of cohort)

**Root canal**  
12 people  
(15% of cohort)

**Dentures**  
21 people  
(26% of cohort)

## Value of Treatment provided

Through partnership of St Pat's, Palmerston and volunteering from dentist Dr Slattery, all the dental treatment was made completely free for all The Farm residents.

**\$107,972**

**Worth of treatment provided over the two years**

Calculated by DVA dental treatment codes assigned costs\*

\*Australian Dental Association. The Australian Schedule of Dental Services and Glossary; 2022.



## Key Benefits



The integration of this trauma informed oral healthcare program within AOD recovery has yielded substantial benefits for individuals and the organisation and has enhanced motivation to address AOD issues and remain in the recovery program.

### AOD treatment, recovery and rehabilitation

“Something like this is essential for recovery. In active addiction you lose sight of your own health, selfcare, all that sort of stuff. So, to be actively participating in your own selfcare, it’s hand in hand with recovery.” – Palmerston Farm Resident

“This is a huge thing for me, to be able to go out into the community now and be confident and not judged.” – Palmerston Farm Resident

### Confidence and self-esteem

### Being able to smile again

“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.” – Palmerston Farm Resident

“To know that I’m healthy and have a good smile in the end and be able to go to job meetings and job interviews and that and also just to be able to talk with my family and my kids. That’s a big, big thing for me.” – Palmerston Farm Resident

### Quality of life and future hopes

### Positive experiences of dental treatment

“I can see why the program at Palmerston works. They don’t rush you into doing things, but they don’t also hold you back from doing things either...at this time in my life and this time in the program, my teeth are just perfect timing for it.” – Palmerston Farm Resident

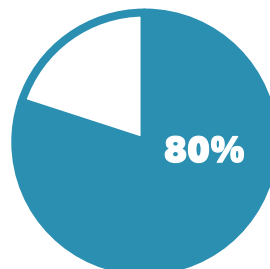
## Impacts on AOD Recovery

Sustaining 12 weeks in an AOD residential rehabilitation program is seen within the sector to be a valuable milestone to reach in terms of likelihood of treatment/recovery outcomes. Whilst recognising that a range of factors can impact on ‘length of stay’, residents who received dental treatment were much more likely to stay at The Farm beyond the 12-week mark.

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

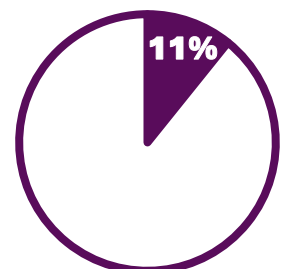
How likely were people to stay at The Farm >12 weeks if they had dental treatment?

Received Dental Treatment



N = 52 out of 65 residents

No Dental Treatment



N = 10 out of 93 residents

## Critical Success Factors



Informed by co-design & lived experience



Trauma-informed approach



Therapeutic group context



Enhancement of AOD recovery



A more holistic approach to health



Partnerships and integration



Generosity of spirit & going above and beyond



Reducing barriers to comprehensive dental care



Embedded evaluation and learning culture

## Overview of Program impacts

The evaluation of the Palmerston Oral Health Program has demonstrated significant benefits for residents and the AOD setting in which it has been implemented, and yielded insights for AOD recovery more broadly, as well as adding weight to calls to improve equity of dental care in Australia.

### PALMERSTON FARM RESIDENTS

- Enhanced AOD treatment motivation and recovery
- Access to low barrier and no-cost dental treatment and significant improvements in oral health
- Reduced perceptions of stigma and judgement from others
- Improved confidence, self-esteem, future hopes, employment prospects
- Broader impacts on family and relationships

### THE FARM & PALMERSTON

- Offering oral health care is a point of difference to other residential AOD services
- Reinforces commitment to holistic support for residents and demonstrates this in a practical way
- Congruent with Therapeutic Community model of care
- Aligns with Palmerston values and Strategic Plan priorities
- Forged positive collaborative relationship with St Pat's and integrating model
- Associated with longer duration of stay in residential rehabilitation

### AOD SECTOR

- First program of its kind in Australia, and adaptable to other AOD settings
- Demonstrates evidence for benefits of integrating oral health care into recovery

### HEALTH SYSTEM & KNOWLEDGE GENERATION

- Adds weight to findings of recent Senate Inquiry and national reports on inequity of dental care access in Australia
- Plausible cost savings to WA health system
- Addresses national and international evidence gap in a solution focused way

**Reference:** Webster D, Wood L, Donnelly C, Douglas A . Evaluation of the Palmerston Oral Health Program. Institute For Health Research, University of Notre Dame Australia. Perth, Western Australia. 2024. For full report please visit: [www.home2health.org](http://www.home2health.org)



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