

Dental Decay

By Sara Barila

In recent months parents have become worried that SA's School Dental Services are declining. Several clinics have recently amalgamated with GP Plus Centres, becoming Community Dental Service clinics.

The SA Dental Service says the closures and amalgamations were due to "limited use", but parents are worried that their local school clinic will be "taken away", that they will have to share the service with a larger client base, and that they will be forced to travel further for treatment.

Any decline in School Dental Services couldn't come at a worse time, with two Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reports discovering that the dental health of Australian kids is in poor shape.

One of the reports, 'Dental decay among Australian children', reveals that despite tooth decay being a very preventable condition, it remains a common disease in Australian kids.

Dental decay among Australian children

The report provides information on the dental decay of Australian children, with data sourced from the 2005 Child Dental Health Survey.

Disturbingly, the AIHW report finds that:

- 45% of SA children aged 5 to 6 had decayed, missing or filled baby teeth
- In 2005, 36% of SA children between 5 and 6 had untreated decay
- 44% of SA's 12 year olds had decay in their permanent teeth
- For 22% of SA's surveyed 12 year olds, the decay in their permanent teeth was untreated
- Australian children of both age groups from lower socio-economic areas had more dental decay than those from other areas.



“... parents are worried that their local school clinic will be “taken away”...”

Tooth decay

Tooth decay is one of the most widespread conditions in the world. It is particularly common in children and young adults, and is often fuelled by a sugary diet and/or poor dental hygiene. The AIHW states that untreated dental decay is “a risk factor for infection, and chronic disease in adult life.”

The SA Dental Service states that reasons for the deterioration in the dental health of SA children are “not clear” but are thought to include:

- Increased consumption of sugary food and drink

- Increased drinking of rain and bottled water that have low fluoride levels
- Reduced exposure to fluoride in toothpaste (low concentration fluoride toothpastes should be replaced by adult toothpaste by age 7).

Prevention

To prevent tooth decay in primary and secondary school children parents can:

- Ensure children are using a fluoride toothpaste
- Ensure children brush their teeth at least twice per day
- Encourage them to brush after meals
- Avoid giving kids sugary food and drinks
- Encourage them to drink tap water
- Promote flossing
- Take children for regular checkups. ■