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**Enabling occupational participation for people with mental illness through improving oral health.**

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In Australia, people with mental illness have a higher incidence of poor oral hygiene than those without mental health issues. The gap between the oral health status of those advantaged and those disadvantaged is both significant and increasing. Mental health clients have been identified as one of the major disadvantaged groups facing significant issues around declining oral health.

This multidisciplinary research project sought to highlight oral health issues for people with mental illness. The study aimed to develop an educational package for health professionals working with people with mental illness and consumers of mental health services, promoting oral hygiene.

The study used a participatory action research approach using a critical group consisting of health professionals and mental health consumers. A survey was designed by the critical group to collect data from health professionals working in regional Victorian mental health services, Australia relating to priorities and gaps in continuing professional development. Focus groups were conducted with mental health consumers to identify what education and information they believed was needed to increase knowledge and understanding of oral hygiene to improve oral health. All critical group meetings were recorded and transcribed, with discussions thematically analysed for content.

An electronic educational package was developed for both health professionals working in mental health and primary care services and consumers of mental health services. Issues such as dental phobia, client motivation and lack of access to public dental services, particularly in regional areas were identified. Lack of knowledge relating to mental health medications that impact upon oral health and the social impact of poor oral health were major issues identified by health professionals.

This study highlighted the benefits of including consumers on the research team to inform and enhance the educational package that was produced. Oral health has a major impact upon someone with mental illness and their ability to participate in chosen occupations. Occupational therapists need to be aware of oral health problems for people with mental health issues, working to promote good oral health given the significant impact it has upon a person's ability to find employment, engage in social occupations and daily self-care occupations.