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Senator Jordon Steele-John

Chair

Select Committee into the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia  
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Dear Senator Steele-John

Thank you for your correspondence of 21 September 2023, in which you requested information on eligibility for public dental services in the Northern Territory. Please find enclosed a detailed response to your questions.

Should the Committee have any further queries or require clarification on the information provided in the attached, please contact my office via [Chief.Minister@nt.gov.au](mailto:Chief.Minister@nt.gov.au).

Kind regards

NATASHA FYLES

**19 OCT 2023**

# The Senate Select Committee into the provision of and access to dental services in Australia

## 1. What are the eligibility criteria for public, or government subsidised, dental and oral health services in the Northern Territory?

NT Health has a longstanding policy on eligibility for public dental care, based on the principle of providing access to services for people who are more likely to be impacted by poor oral health and experience difficulties accessing care. The purpose of the policy is ensure eligibility and therefore access to public oral health service is applied consistently throughout the Northern Territory (NT). Expected policy outcomes are to provide clarity to patients and consumers, communities, referring services and NT Health staff regarding who is eligible for public oral health care, equitable access to oral health services for populations at highest risk of dental or related disease, and to those least able to afford private dental care. Due to the limited available resources for public oral health care, not applying this policy would compromise fairness and timing of providing oral health care to high risk groups in the NT.

NT Health's approach to eligibility for Public Oral Health Services is founded upon the following principles:

- we support fairness and equity of access to quality oral health care
- we will prioritise those in most need, based on risk of disease and health complications and
- we support early detection and intervention of oral disease to reduce the overall burden of disease.

### Eligibility Criteria

1. Children: All NT children under the age of 18 years are eligible for general public oral health services, provided by, or on behalf of, the NT. It is recognised that some young adults may be at or above the age of majority when completing secondary school studies and are considered to be eligible if they remain enrolled in secondary education.

Note 1: This does not apply to adults enrolled in tertiary education or vocational training who do not meet adult eligibility criteria below.

Note 2: General oral health services include dental examinations, hygiene and preventive services, fillings, extractions, root canal treatments, mouthguards, stainless steel crowns and other general dental services determined by the treating practitioner.

2. Adults: To be eligible for general public oral health services provided by or on behalf of the NT, adults (18 years and older) must hold, or be listed as a dependent on any of the following Australian Government Cards:
  - a current Health Care Card issued by the Australian Department of Human Services; or
  - a current Pensioner Concession Card issued by the Australian Department of Human Services; or
  - a current Commonwealth Seniors Health Card issued by the Australian Department of Human Services; or
  - a current Gold or White Repatriation Health Care Card issued by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA).

**Note:** General oral health services include dental examinations, hygiene and preventive services, periodontal services, fillings, extractions, root canal treatments, dentures, crowns/bridges where clinical criteria are met and other general dental services determined by the treating practitioner.

3. **Aboriginal People living in Remote Communities:** All Aboriginal people residing in remote outreach community settings are eligible for public oral health care (regardless of card status) when there is a public dental team in that community. In the absence of a visiting dental team, patients can be referred by their community clinic for urgent care to an urban clinic.

Note: When there is longer term relocation to an urban area, eligibility is then determined by card status listed above. Local referrals to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations are facilitated where required.

4. **Urgent Care in Remote Communities by a visiting dental team:** Anyone with an emergency dental situation (such as relief of pain, treatment of infection or treatment of traumatic injuries to the teeth and mouth) as determined by a dental practitioner or a referring health practitioner is eligible for an episode of care to manage the presenting condition.
5. **People with Additional Needs:** The following priority groups are eligible for public oral health care, regardless of card status, when identified by an established referral process:
  - individuals listed on the NT Rheumatic Heart Disease Register
  - people undergoing cancer therapies who require supportive oral care
  - people requiring dental fitness for transplant surgery
  - people undergoing renal dialysis
  - people who have diagnosed mental health conditions who are referred by the managing practitioner for supportive oral health care
  - people living with disability who require supportive oral care, as determined by the referring practitioner
  - people who are actively enrolled in a program for substance addiction treatment
  - People living in full-time residential care facilities, including aged care
  - People who are experiencing or are at risk of domestic or sexual violence who require supportive care
  - people currently experiencing homelessness or insecure housing
  - refugees and asylum seekers
6. **Public Hospital Inpatients:** Inpatients are eligible when identified by an established referral process, for situations where an oral health condition is impacting, or has potential to impact on, the condition for which they have been admitted or the prognosis for treatment of that condition.
7. **Correctional services:** People who are currently residing in a correctional facility are eligible for public oral health services in accordance with local processes determined by the Health Service and correctional facility. Note: People on remand are only eligible for urgent care.
8. A small range of visiting specialist services are provided by NT Health, such as orthodontics, oral surgery and special needs dental services, subject to meeting aforementioned eligibility criteria and therapeutic indications assessed by a dental officer, detailed in clinical protocol.
9. **Change in Eligibility:** If an individual's eligibility status lapses partway through a course of care they are considered to be eligible until remaining time critical care, as determined by the

The Senate Select Committee into the provision of and access to dental services in Australia treating practitioner, is completed. Following all time-critical care, referral to the private sector is provided at the individual's expense.

10. **Cross Border Eligibility:** Residents of remote communities in adjacent states to NT may be granted temporary eligibility status and limited urgent care as determined by the Clinical Manager of the relevant oral health service. In most cases a letter of referral/support will be provided by a health practitioner from their community clinic.

**2. When were these criteria developed, and by whom?**

The above criteria were developed within NT Health's longstanding policy on eligibility for public dental care. This policy has been in place for decades, with periodic review. Initial iterations of the policy were overseen by the (then) NT Oral Health Service. Following Departmental restructure and centralisation of policy functions in 2012-2014, the responsibility for this overarching eligibility policy was transferred to the Chief Dental Officer.

**3. Since they were developed, have these criteria been reviewed? If so, when was this done, and what was the outcome?**

Eligibility criteria are periodically reviewed by way of routine policy cycles. Current eligibility criteria were reviewed in 2014, 2017, 2020 and 2023, with minor changes based on broad consultation. Changes have focused on harmonisation of access to care across NT, and recognition of people who are at greater risk for oral disease and/or are more likely to experience difficulties accessing care. During the most recent review, the following changes were implemented:

- format aligned with current NT Health templates
- change in title to harmonise with World Health Organisation definition of oral health
- simplification
- clarified definitions
- included cross border eligibility
- eligibility for general services was extended to all Aboriginal people living in remote communities, irrespective of having a government-issued Health Care Card, recognising the overall increased prevalence and severity of oral disease for this sub-population.

**4. Does the Northern Territory Government have any plans to review these criteria in the future?**

Like all NT Health policy, routine review cycles are applied. The next review of the policy is planned for 2026.

**5. Has the Northern Territory Government received any evidence, including significant anecdotal evidence, that these criteria may not be fit for purpose?**

Broad consultation on the policy has occurred with regional providers of public oral health services at each policy renewal cycle. Aboriginal Health and Policy units, chronic condition areas and other community providers of healthcare, professional leads and Aboriginal Medical Services were also consulted. Feedback has typically focused on broadening criteria to reflect burden of disease and need for supportive oral care.