

Oral Health, Swallowing & Hydration in Aged Care

Position

Dietitians Australia is calling on the Australian Government to urgently fund the development of evidence-based 'National Meal Guidelines', including governance and accountability frameworks for residential aged care providers.

Aged Care Providers should establish a multidisciplinary team with members of the dental profession, speech pathologists and Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) to manage the oral health, swallowing and hydration of aged care consumers.

Recommendations

1. Interprofessional teams including members of the dental profession, speech pathologists and Accredited Practising Dietitians are needed within all residential aged care facilities to manage the oral health, swallowing and hydration of aged care consumers.
2. The development of evidence-based 'National Meal Guidelines', including governance and accountability frameworks, is needed for quality and safety within residential aged care. In relation to oral health, swallowing and hydration, these guidelines will support implementation and evaluation of the International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) guidelines.
3. Government funding to be provided to bring together a multidisciplinary group of experts (including Accredited Practising Dietitians) to enable IDDSI implementation nationally.

Background

Good oral health is essential throughout life, but is particularly critical in later life as it is associated with quality of life and general health.¹ Age related oral health issues include maintenance and repair of natural teeth which can be impacted by decay, gum disease and oral cancers. There are numerous challenges to embedding oral health initiatives due to misalignment between the aged care and dental care sectors.¹ Prioritising oral health in residential care can be difficult, whilst lack of knowledge/skills of oral hygiene by care staff can also contribute.²

Swallowing is also of critical importance in older adults, with dysphagia prevalent in 50-70% of consumers of residential aged care.³ Outcomes of dysphagia include malnutrition and dehydration³ and can be exacerbated by use of incorrect feeding positions, inconsistent food consistencies, and oral and dental problems. The provision of meals and drinks consistent with the recommendations of speech pathologists and the International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) guidelines⁴ is essential.

Meeting the hydration needs of aged care consumers also remains challenging. Recommendations for fluid intakes are approximately 1.5L daily, yet achieving this target can be compromised through issues including cognition and dysphagia.

References

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