Aboriginal parents’ perceptions of oral health: Challenges to accessing services

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Background

- Aboriginal health as a ‘wicked’ problem (Rittel & Webber 1973)
- Compared to other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and children have higher rates of:
  - decayed teeth
  - untreated dental caries
  - periodontal disease (AIHW 2013)
- Slow progress reducing health disparities (AIHW 2014)
The aim of this paper is to present findings on a qualitative study in Perth WA investigating Aboriginal parents’ perceptions of barriers to accessing oral health care and suggestions for improvement.
Methods

Qualitative research

Ethics approval

Community consultation

52 participants across 10 sites in Perth WA
9 group discussions
1 interview

Analysis to identify key themes emerging from responses
Avoiding dental visits – Cost

• Private

• Public

*It costs you money as well. Like, if I’m not in pain, then I’m not going to go and fork out, you know, what is it, $80 or whatever to go and have it just checked when I don’t even feel the pain, so there is nothing wrong. And when you have got like lots of kids it’s not going to happen (L7)*

• Emergency

*The only time our family goes is if we are crying in pain.*
Avoiding dental visits - Access

• Location
• Transport
• Long waiting times
• Not child friendly

I was a single mum, no support, no family over here. So when I did get into that dentist early in the morning, they said ‘what did you bring your kids here for?... And they said ‘we can’t treat you, you have got to find a place for your children’. And I’m like ‘well, what am I meant to do with them?’ and they’re like ‘well, ring up someone to come and get them’ and I’m like ‘I don’t have anyone’ and they said ‘oh, everyone has someone’. And they freaked out...

...you have to take your kids with you, you can’t leave your kids at school before 8:00, you know what I mean, there are all these things that restrict you getting your teeth done
Avoiding dental visits: Discrimination

• Aboriginality

I want to be treated like everyone else that walks in the door. Some people when they see an Aboriginal person coming, we are all put in that category we are all put in that box if they have had a bad experience with another Aboriginal person. They wouldn’t do that to an Italian woman if they had a bad experience with another Italian woman. But they will do it with an Aboriginal person.
Avoiding dental visits: Discrimination

• Judgements about oral health

…another lecture on how to look after your teeth when it’s actually other stuff that keeps you from accessing in the first place. But then they just treat you like you don’t know anything and like you’re from another planet and they give you more lectures … You are in pain and you’re there to receive health not to be lectured (L6)
Avoiding dental visits: Discrimination

• SES

She doesn’t want to go there. The people at the desk, the receptionists – their sour faces. She is frightened she is going to lose her temper because she is in so much pain and she’s going to get there and they are going to say with their sour face ‘you haven’t paid your bill’. That bill is two years old. And she is going to lose her temper because she is … and start swearing and then they are going to kick her out. So she is scared of the confrontation and the drama and the rejection and what will happen when she turns up. And the fact that in front of all these people she is going to be humiliated because she has got no money, and hasn’t been paying the bill.
Findings

- **Shame**

*She was too embarrassed because she didn’t have the money so she never went back for treatment. Her teeth are just falling out. … They are ashamed and they are also broke, they have got no car, they have got no money, they can’t get to the dentist at 7.30 in the morning.*

*It feels degrading and it makes me want to… I want to see change. But this particular time I wasn’t in a good mood. Wasn’t in a good space. I was like ‘I’m not coming back’. Because you will go back to the services that look after you, and if you don’t get that service you just don’t go back. People don’t like it … if you’re getting bad service at that dentist, why would you go back?*
Suggestions for improvement included

- education about prevention of disease and promotion of oral health from pregnancy onwards
- similar services to schools dental service for 0-4 year olds
- respectful and welcoming dental services
- parents as role models
- upstream determinants of oral health

Like what you were saying about the impact of alcohol and cigarettes, the way they use that shock tactic, should be applied to sugar – if you want to get the message through, show the shocking facts about what sugar does to poor little kids and adults
Findings suggest

- current models of oral health care not meeting needs of Aboriginal families in Perth
- focus on treatment rather than prevention
- structural issues: distance, costs, upstream determinants, lack of education about oral health
- discrimination in health services leads non-attendance by Aboriginal families
- solutions involve more than just delivering evidence based care (Kleinman et al 1978)
- critical reflection on beliefs and assumptions about Aboriginal people to ensure they promote rather than compromise the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal patients (Kleinman et al 1978, Durey et al 2011)
Conclusion

... by the playgroups and preschools – even if you think your kids teeth are fine – bring them in. At least check them. Once a year you should be invited in and get a free health check, dental check for these babies. So you see them at two years old and ‘oh yes, you get a good tick’ and they come in the next year and it’s ‘ooh, that tooth, that’s not going to last. We are going to have to do something about that’ Here they get nothing till they are five and that is just ridiculous. And then you are looking at dental emergencies instead of treating it when it could have been treated with a filling or whatever. And now they are in the Children’s Hospital being put under [general anaesthetic], which is dangerous and stressful having a hospital procedure and something really painful when it could have been prevented. So it is like this great big hole in the system. This massive big hole where these kids are just falling in.
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References


