

Working with the Stolen Generations: understanding trauma

Providing effective dental services to Stolen Generations survivors

This fact sheet considers challenges for dental staff in dealing with Stolen Generations survivors and information about what is likely to be helpful. As with any population group, there is enormous diversity among Stolen Generations survivors, and this fact sheet should be viewed as a starting point only.

Trauma

Stolen Generations survivors endured trauma and grief as a result of their forcible removal from family, community and culture, and were often subjected to harsh and degrading treatment including physical and sexual abuse, exploitation and racism. Many were also denied education.

When interacting with survivors and their families, it's helpful to recognise the trauma many people carry.

The perceived feeling of vulnerability and lack of control within the dental chair (not being able to speak or move), can remind Stolen Generations survivors of the way they were treated as a child and may trigger trauma and lead to problem-based patterns of attendance. Seeing a dentist can be a particularly difficult experience for survivors if they have been sexually abused.

Common triggers for Stolen Generations survivors include anything that reminds them of childhood trauma, including:

- clinical settings resembling an institution they were placed in as a child
- a tone of voice, such as a person projecting authority
- a look on someone's face or a gesture
- any situation that brings back feelings of the lack of control they experienced when they were taken from their families.

Health

- 67% live with a disability or restrictive long term condition
- 39% report poor mental health



How you can help

- Ensure all staff dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients receive basic education regarding trauma and its impacts.
- Talk to Stolen Generations survivors about their individual needs, which may vary significantly from person to person.
- Respect people's choices, particularly regarding touch, and consider alternative arrangements if a Stolen Generations patient is uncomfortable.
- Use plain English and give clear explanations that are tailored to people's needs and level of understanding and education. For example, consider demonstrating oral hygiene techniques rather than providing written information.
- Explain the process and actions involved in a dental appointment before, during and after treatment.
- Frame directions as suggestions wherever possible, such as 'If you're happy to take a seat in the chair we can have a look at what's going on'.
- Where possible, allow additional time for consultations with Stolen Generations survivors.
- Consider whether someone may need support during an appointment and be flexible in considering alternatives to make the process as simple and straightforward as possible.
- Use discretion when asking people about traumatic experiences, recognise where they are in their healing and be guided by each person about how much they share at any time.
- If people do share their stories, consider how this can be recorded or shared with other relevant staff with the permission of the Stolen Generations survivor (perhaps by seeking permission to include it in the person's dental records/notes), to prevent them having to retell it.
- As many Stolen Generations survivors have often had inadequate, inappropriate or false records kept about them it is important to be mindful of the language used and include survivors in preparation of any written documentation.
- Consider adding a tick box to new patient forms asking if the person is a Stolen Generations survivor.
- Ensure people know their rights and encourage them to speak up if these are not being respected and ensure they feel supported doing so. For example, who to go to and what the process is if they need to make a complaint.
- Let people know that their privacy will be protected; this is part of building trust.
- Build partnerships with trusted third parties such as local Stolen Generations/Link-Up organisations and Social and Emotional Wellbeing Counsellors to better support Stolen Generations patients.
- Ensure policies and procedures are in place to prevent racism and discrimination.
- Ensure facilities and services are culturally friendly. For example, incorporate cultural awareness/safety requirements into policy and training materials.
- Encourage all staff dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients to undertake Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness/safety training specific to the local area.
- If possible, employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff with an understanding of the trauma affecting Stolen Generations survivors. This includes those in administration roles, dentists and other dental staff.

Things to avoid

- Shining torches in people's eyes – this is particularly important to consider when using loupes with a bright light or the overhead light attached to the dental chair. It would be helpful to ask Stolen Generations survivors for permission before using these, and let them know that while the lights are designed to shine in people's mouths they can sometimes shine in a person's eyes accidentally.
- Making assumptions. For example about people's needs and their level of literacy (including health literacy), where they are at in their healing, who the decision maker might be for them, and who they would like their information shared with.
- Requiring proof of Aboriginality.
- Using medical jargon or acronyms.
- Shouting, purposefully talking slowly or right in a person's face based on assumptions about their ability to understand.
- Making negative statements that dismiss people's trauma and grief e.g. 'move on'.

Further information

To learn more about providing effective dental services to Stolen Generations patients view the full version of this fact sheet here <https://healingfoundation.org.au/working-stolen-generations/>