



MEDIA RELEASE

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Lack of funding for dental health research despite growing impact on Australians

Investment crucial to address health inequalities

An examination of Australian research funding of oral health sciences compared to other major diseases has found investment in the area is underfunded, and not keeping up with the burden of disease in the country.

With research key to ensuring more equitable, accessible and effective dental care for all Australians, experts from multiple universities are calling on governments to re-examine how research funding is allocated in coming years.

The study investigated major government funding schemes, which included the Australian Research Council (ARC), the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), and Medical Research Future Funds (MRFF) grants.

The analysis found oral health sciences to have the lowest and most inequitable level of support, when compared with other research fields on burden of disease.

Burden of disease is the impact of living with illness and injury and dying prematurely, and also measures the years of healthy life lost.

Dental health issues are already on the rise in Australia, with approximately 70,000 preventable hospitalisations due to dental health issues each year, with 25 percent being preventable.

Socially disadvantaged groups are most affected by poor oral health. Researchers say it is vital there is more investment into prevention-focused public oral health programs or health inequalities will only worsen.

In the USA, the National Institute of Health provided \$485 million to fund oral health research, representing 1.1 percent of total research funding. In comparison, in Australia, total NHMRC funding for dental disorders between 2017 to 2021 was \$15 million, which is 0.23 percent of total NHMRC funding for the top 75 diseases with the highest burden of disease.

Immunological diseases and environmental and occupational health are not on the Australian burden of disease list. However, compared to oral health research, the NHMRC funded \$381.6 million and \$87.7 million respectively for research in those areas between 2017 – 2021.

A lack of funding allocated to oral health science was also reflected in allocations from the ARC and MRFF with only \$3.43 million and \$1.88 million respectively

The findings are published in the *Australian Dental Journal* and are led by researchers from the University of Sydney, University of Melbourne, University of Queensland and University of Adelaide.

“What we’re highlighting is that being proactive is key for all diseases, but what we’ve found is that dental health is being neglected when it comes to funding,” says senior author [Professor Heiko Spallek](#), head of school and dean of the [University of Sydney School of dentistry](#).

“Oral health is a fundamental human right and plays an often-overlooked role in our general health and wellbeing – until it is too late. It plays a role in more than just chewing our food. Ignoring oral health will only increase the disease burden of Australians, and potentially lead to future disabilities, hospitalisation and great distress.”

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, oral problems caused 107,058 person-years lived with disabilities in 2015, accounting for 4.4 percent of Australia’s non-fatal disease burden. The fifth-highest disease burden among children aged 5 to 14 is tooth decay.

[Dr Arash Ghanbarzadegan](#), lecturer from the University of Sydney Dental School led the analysis.

“The burden of diseases is an invaluable guide to helping policymakers allocate resources,” says Dr Ghanbarzadegan.

“More equitable research funding will help researchers maximise the impact on oral health and enable all Australian to receive appropriate dental care.”

What the analysis revealed

The analysis used the Fair Research Funding (FRF) index, which measures how NHMRC funding is allocated according to the disease burden (years lost because of a disease and years lost due to disability or illness.)

There is equitable funding when FRF equals one. A result greater than one FRF shows inequitable research funding. A result less than one shows excessive funding based on the disease burden.

Oral health diseases had the greatest funding inequity with 10.70, followed by musculoskeletal conditions at 3.53.

Interactive table of results: <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/12163951/>

Disease group	Disease Burden (% among top 75 diseases)	NHMRC budget 2017-2021 (million AUD)	NHMRC Budget 2017 - 2021 (% among top 75 diseases)	Fair Research Funding Index	Disease group	Disease Burden (% among top 75 diseases)	NHMRC budget 2017-2021 (million AUD)	NHMRC Budget 2017 - 2021 (% among top 75 diseases)	Fair Research Funding Index
Oral disorders	2.44	15.00	0.23	10.70	Neurological conditions	7.33	1015.30	15.45	0.47
Musculoskeletal conditions	12.83	238.60	3.63	3.53	Blood & metabolic disorders	0.72	114.00	1.73	0.42
Injuries	8.22	240.40	3.66	2.25	Kidney & urinary diseases	1.05	197.50	3.01	0.35
Respiratory diseases	8.94	267.30	4.07	2.20	Endocrine disorders	2.55	558.00	8.49	0.30
Cardiovascular diseases	15.55	539.40	8.21	1.89	Reproductive & maternal conditions	0.78	336.90	5.13	0.15
Skin disorders	1.50	53.10	0.81	1.86	Infant & congenital conditions	1.05	513.10	7.81	0.14
Mental & substance use disorders	13.05	514.60	7.83	1.67	Infectious diseases	0.72	794.40	12.09	0.06
Cancer & other neoplasms	18.99	860.20	13.09	1.45					
Hearing & vision disorders	2.11	110.30	1.68	1.26					
Gastrointestinal diseases	2.17	203.60	3.10	0.70					

-ENDS-

Read the research: ‘Oral health research funding in relation to disease burden in Australia’ in [Australian Dental Journal](#).

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Declaration: Professor Heiko Spallek is the Head of School and Dean of the Sydney Dental School. He is a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee for Dentroid technologies. He is the director at Community Connections Australia (CCA), which provides a range of tailored services to people who live with disabilities. Sašo Ivanovski is the head of the University of Queensland Dental School. Alastair J Sloan is the head of the University of Melbourne Dental School.

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