

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 10.30am ON 9 December 2021

Prisoner access to dental care in Western Australia

A report released today by the Inspector of Custodial Services, Eamon Ryan, has found that the number of dentists currently servicing the Western Australian prison estate is alarmingly inadequate. Mr Ryan said that there is research indicating that one FTE dental team is required for every 150 people in custody. Using this as a benchmark for the whole prison system, over 45 FTE are required to reasonably service the needs of the prison population. It currently stands at 2.7 FTE for the eight prisons covered by a Memorandum of Understanding between the Departments of Justice and Health. These prisons have daily average of approximately 4,000 prisoners. The remaining nine prisons in Western Australia hold around 2,500 prisoners and rely on a mix of arrangements with prisoners being escorted to clinics in the community. Mr Ryan explained:

We have been concerned about prisoners' access to dental care over many years. Prisoners, their families, staff, and other stakeholders regularly raise this issue with us during our inspection and liaison work. They make complaints through a variety of other mechanisms including internally to the Department of Justice and to other external complaints bodies. But we have not seen any improvement and in some cases, it has resulted in prisoners taking their own action – we met one prisoner who proudly showed us a tooth he had pulled out himself after experiencing chronic pain due to waiting too long to see the dentist.

The report recommended that the State Government commit additional resources to increase the number of dental teams accessible to Western Australian prisons. In responding to this report, the Department of Justice has written to the Department of Health advising it of the additional demand for dental services and to seek its support for adequate resources. Mr Ryan welcomes these efforts.

Good oral health is a critical part of our overall health and wellbeing allowing us to talk, eat, and drink without experiencing pain, discomfort, or embarrassment. It is a sad reality that for some people, prison is the only time they see a dentist. This means they are more likely to need a higher level of service and more intensive treatments.

Prisoners are people passing through the prison setting and returning to the community. So, the benefits of providing them with adequate dental care goes well beyond the prison gate. A mouth full of healthy teeth and gums can boost self-esteem and self-confidence. Prisoners with missing or damaged teeth can face barriers gaining employment. That is why improving prisoner access to dental care needs to be considered a part of the Department's rehabilitative and reintegrative mandate.

It is often said that prisoners should not come to prison to get their teeth fixed, but this report shows this argument to be far too simplistic. Mr Ryan said:

Prisoners are not seeking anything more than timely access to basic dental care that addresses things like gum disease, dental caries, infection, and dental pain.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector

For Further Media Information

The Inspector, Mr Eamon, will be available for comment from 10.30am on 9 December 2021 and can be contacted on 0421 480 925.

The full report will be available on the Inspector's website (www.oics.wa.gov.au).