

Trauma-Informed Dental Service

Survivors of trauma are unable to access dental care in Australia as the system is not set up for it. This affects their oral, mental, and general health, and ultimately their quality of life.

Warning: This pamphlet contains information that may be confronting for some readers.

What is trauma?

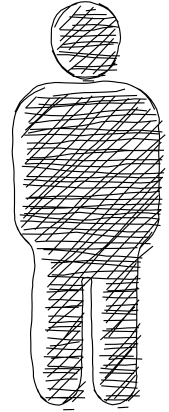
'Trauma' is a normal response to external stress that overwhelms a person's ability to cope.

Types of trauma:

- 'Single incident': well-defined event. E.g bushfire
- 'Complex': multiple ongoing events. E.g domestic violence

All trauma:

- Is carried as a strong body memory.
- Results in changes to the brain E.g stuck in fear-driven survival mode.
- Is on a spectrum from mild to severe.
- Can often be extremely debilitating.
- Involves a loss of power, control, and personal agency.



When people feel helpless / powerless again, this triggers memories of the initial traumatic events, leading to anxiety and panic.

How does this relate to dentistry?

The dental environment is full of triggers for memories, particularly due to the

- Power imbalance between the oral health professional and patient physically, emotionally, financially and psychologically, and
- The many parallels between dental appointments and traumatic experiences.

For example, imagine you're a survivor of sexual assault, so you have already had your trust broken and your agency taken away. You are at a dental appointment, and:

- You're back in the same position as the abuse, lying in the lap of a trusted authority figure.
- Their body keeps touching yours, invading your personal space.
- Your jaw is tired from being held open
- Your mouth is full of fingers and instruments.
- You can't move or speak.
- You feel totally at their mercy, wondering what's going to happen next...



Oral health professionals:

- Are usually unaware of these issues.
- Receive no training in how to recognise or work with trauma survivors.
- Without realising it, can reactivate memories by repeating abusive dynamics and retraumatise their patients, compounding the problem.

Consequently, there is a global issue with dental anxiety, phobia, and avoidance by survivors of trauma, so they generally have very poor oral health.

Trauma is extremely common.

As oral health professionals, we are already seeing survivors as our regular patients without being aware of this.

Trauma usually stays hidden. Most people are not comfortable to disclose their history.

- For example, at least 1/3 of our female patients and 1/6 of our male patients have been sexually assaulted by the age of 18 in Australia.
- The real numbers are understood to be much higher due to under-reporting.
- As oral health practitioners, we would each be seeing at least one survivor a day.
- COVID lockdowns have caused exponential increases in rates of family violence and sexual assault.

Who we are

Dr Sharonne Zaks AM, BDS Sc Ad Dip Mus FICD FPFA

Sharonne lives and breathes this work and is on a mission to transform the way dentistry is practised. She has 24 years of experience as a dentist with a special interest in working with survivors of trauma, anxious, and phobic patients, and is a passionate educator and researcher. She is the first person to comprehensively integrate the trauma-informed approach into dentistry. Her widely used free video resources, TEDx talk, and lectures have attracted global interest and media attention with interviews, including by the ABC, SBS, BBC and The Age. Her contribution to the profession has been recognised with awards including the ADAVB Dentistry Achievement Award in 2021.



A/Prof Rachel Martin, BDS Sc MPH GradDip Ed FICD FPFA

As a Dentist and registered Specialist in Public Health Dentistry, Rachel has focussed her career on improving the lives of vulnerable people through oral health within all health. With three decades of experience in clinical practice and governance; education and training; research, translation, and advocacy, Rachel chairs the Public Dentists Committee (ADAVB) and National Notification Committee (Dental Board of Australia) and is a board member of the Australian Dental Research Foundation. This commitment to oral health equity led her to establish and co-found the Australian Network for the Integration of Oral Health in 2017.



There is enormous demand for trauma-informed dental care nationally and globally

- Dr Zaks has been overwhelmed with demand; patients have been travelling from all over Australia to see her, as the only dental practitioner known to be offering a trauma-informed dental service.
- Oral health practitioners world-wide are asking for training in trauma-informed dental care and organisations and clinicians need a place to refer their clients.



There is a huge need to scale this up!

The Solution:

The world's first **Social Enterprise Trauma-Informed Dental Service**, addressing these inequities in oral health.

- All profits made will be invested back into the service.
- An interprofessional collaboration, bringing together health professionals, care providers and other partners to create the best experience of oral health care for trauma survivors.

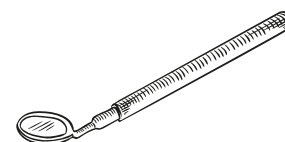
The service will include the following:

Dental clinic: including a mobile outreach service and a fully equipped clinic in Melbourne, Australia, intentionally set up for this population.

Education: Including undergraduate and postgraduate students, clinicians, and staff in dental teams, locally and nationally. A national register of qualified clinicians will be created.

Research: Evaluation of process and outcomes of the education and clinical arms, including the economic effectiveness of the social enterprise model and program

Proven outcomes for survivors and clinicians:



This approach has been proven to benefit all patients, staff, clinicians, and organisations.

- Survivors are able to rebuild trust in oral health professionals and this extends to other health professionals. They develop confidence in their ability to handle dental appointments, and this capability is taken into other areas of their lives.
- Survivors can smile, eat, kiss, speak, and sleep comfortably again, without pain and embarrassment. This improves their self-confidence, self-worth, quality of their relationships, ability to gain employment and find partners, ability to release shame and guilt and heal from their trauma.
- Clinicians and students feel confident and competent in managing the many sensitivities and complexities involved in working with survivors of trauma, anxious and phobic patients. The deeper connection developed with patients leads to a much better quality of care. Their professional fulfilment grows from this highly rewarding work, which transforms people's lives

We are looking for:

Partners, support in-kind and donations, in particular:

- Expressions of interest to join our Advisory Board
- A venue from which to run the trauma-informed dental clinic
- Donation of dental materials and equipment
- Legal assistance
- Financial and business development advice
- Investors



What our partners have to gain:

- Be part of a world first movement that is gathering momentum.
- Increased global reach and brand awareness.
- Huge media interest in this service and story (many media contacts already primed).
- Association with an ethical and inclusive dental service.
- Help thousands of people access dental care who are currently excluded from it.

Current supporters:

The Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA)
Open Place
Orange Door
Safe and Equal
Blue Knot Foundation
University of Melbourne
Australian Network for the Integration of Oral Health
NSK
Baker McKenzie



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