

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 contains information that may be confronting for some readers.

What is trauma?

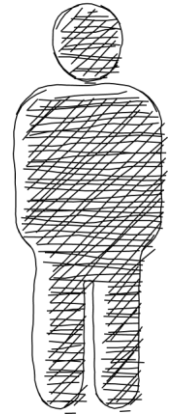
‘Trauma’ is a normal response to external stress that overwhelms a person’s ability to cope.

Types of trauma:

- ‘Single incident’: a 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 or 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 of 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.
- COVID lockdowns have caused exponential increases in rates of family violence and sexual assault.
- As oral health practitioners, we would each be seeing at least one survivor of sexual assault every day.

About the founder and developer of trauma-informed dental care

Dr Sharonne Zaks AM BDSc, 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 25 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 including interviews by the ABC, BBC, SBS, The Age, and many others.

She is a clinical lecturer at the University of Melbourne and regularly speaks at conferences around Australia and internationally, most recently at the Royal Society of Medicine in London. Her work has been published in a globally acclaimed book with a second one on the way.



Sharonne's contribution to the profession has been recognised with two prestigious international fellowships, the ADAVB Dentistry Achievement Award, and in 2023, her appointment as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her 'significant service to dentistry and to the arts'.

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.
- This will be 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 comprise the following 3 arms:

Dental clinics: 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 and clinicians and staff in dental teams, locally and nationally. A national register of qualified clinicians will be created.

Research: Evaluation of the 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, the 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 they develop with patients leads to a much better quality of care. Their professional fulfilment grows from this highly rewarding work, which transforms people's lives.

The service is currently looking for:

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

- Expressions of interest to join the Board of Directors.
- A venue from which to run the trauma-informed dental clinic.
- Donation of dental materials and equipment.
- Financial and business development advice.
- Help to set up a website.
- Investors and funding opportunities.



What partners have to gain:

- Help many thousands of Australians to access dental care who are currently excluded from it.
- 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 with many media contacts already primed.
- Association with an ethical and inclusive dental service.

Current supporters:

- Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVIC) and The Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA)
- The Australian Dental Association (ADA)
- Baker McKenzie legal firm
- The University of Melbourne
- Australian Network for the Integration of Oral Health (NIOH)
- Open Place
- Orange Door
- Safe and Equal
- Blue Knot Foundation
- NSK



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