

Working with the Stolen Generations: understanding trauma

Providing effective dental services to Stolen Generations survivors

This fact sheet provides information for dental staff to enhance services for Stolen Generations survivors. 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.

Being trauma-aware and informed

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

The 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.

Seeing a dentist can be particularly difficult for survivors if they have been sexually abused.

Common triggers for Stolen Generations survivors include:

- clinical settings resembling an institution they were placed in as a child, including certain smells, room or office colour schemes, uniforms and face masks
- being touched, particularly without permission or during intimate examinations and procedures

- being authoritative through tone of voice, body language, facial expressions and/or gestures
- any situation that you are aware of that could cause a survivor anxiety or fear

Health

- In 2018–19, 61% of Stolen Generations survivors aged 50 and over lived with a disability or restrictive long term condition¹
- In 2018–19, Stolen Generations survivors were 1.4 times as likely to report poor mental health (40%) as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the same age who were not removed²

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' or being dismissive of the potential impact of trauma triggers before, during or after a dental visit

How you can help

Survivor-centred, culturally safe practice

- Talk to Stolen Generations survivors about their individual needs which will vary significantly from person to person
- Respect people's choices, particularly regarding touch, and consider alternative arrangements if a Stolen Generations patient is uncomfortable. Include Stolen Generations survivors and their chosen representatives in discussions about potential alternative arrangements
- Explain the process and actions involved in a dental appointment before, during and after treatment. Not understanding what is happening or feeling a lack of control over the process can remind survivors of the way they were treated as a child
- Where possible, allow additional time for consultations with Stolen Generations survivors
- 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 a person discloses they are a survivor or descendant at any point in the care relationship, ask them whether they give permission for that to be recorded in their file. Are there things important for the other staff in the service to know?
- Let people know that their privacy will be protected; this is part of building trust. This can be a continuous process as part of maintaining relationships built on trust

Language

- 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
- Reframe 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'
- Be mindful of the language you use and be prepared to show people what you have written about them and make changes/additions at their request. Inadequate, inappropriate and false records were kept about many Stolen Generations survivors and their families in the past

Organisational

Policies

- Build partnerships with trusted third parties such as local Stolen Generations/Link-Up organisations and Social and Emotional Wellbeing Counsellors⁴ to better support Stolen Generations patients⁵
- Ensure people know their rights, encourage them to speak up if these are not being respected, and support them to do so. For example, who to go to and what the process is if they need to make a complaint

Procedures

- 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
- Consider adding a tick box to new patient forms asking if the person is a Stolen Generations survivor. Include a tick box option of "prefer not to say". This provides an easy way for survivors to identify themselves if they would like to without engaging in a potentially triggering conversation
- Ensure policies and procedures are in place to prevent racism and discrimination, call out racist attitudes and discriminatory behaviours wherever they occur, and share your knowledge about trauma and its impact on Stolen Generations survivors

Staff capability

- Ensure all staff working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients receive ongoing education regarding trauma, intergenerational trauma and how it affects people (e.g. this fact sheet). This can help in understanding why people may react in particular ways
- Actively encourage all staff working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients to undertake ongoing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety training specific to the local area. For example, it is important to understand the impact of Sorry Business on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities (e.g. missing appointments, taking time out)
- 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

Environment

- Ensure facilities and services are trauma informed and culturally responsive. For example, incorporate cultural safety and trauma informed requirements into policy and training materials and include elements that support a culturally responsive environment e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, artworks, books and children's activities in your practice. If your practice has a Reconciliation Action Plan, this could be amended to specifically mention Stolen Generations survivors.

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/>

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