

**MEDIA RELEASE**

**4/8/2023**

## **Delivering culturally safe oral health to more Aboriginal children**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children around the Loddon Mallee region now have better and more culturally safe access to an important preventive dental treatment that reduces their risk of tooth decay by around 40 per cent.

The first eight Aboriginal Health Practitioners trained to apply fluoride varnish in Victoria recently gained their accreditations following a change to the regulations enabling them to deliver the important preventive intervention.

Fluoride varnish when applied to teeth at 6-month intervals provides protection to help prevent tooth decay in young children.

The *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Regulations* were amended in February 2022 to enable Aboriginal Health Practitioners to obtain, possess and administer fluoride varnish to children three to 17 years old. Previously it could only be applied by oral health professionals.

The Aboriginal Health Practitioner Fluoride Varnish Program is funded by the Department of Health, coordinated by Dental Health Services Victoria, and delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCOs).

The program enables training for up to 20 Aboriginal Health Practitioners to be accredited to deliver two fluoride varnish applications to 350 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at their ACCO. The training has been delivered in partnership with Dental Health Services Victoria and RMIT University - with regional public dental clinics generously supporting practical training.

The first graduates are from the Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group (LMARG) ACCOs - Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative, Mallee District Aboriginal Services in Mildura, Swan Hill and Kerang, Njernda Aboriginal Corporation in Echuca - and from the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO).

Aboriginal Health Practitioners from across the state interested in becoming accredited to apply fluoride varnish are encouraged to apply for the program's second round, which will open in the coming weeks.

DHSV CEO Susan McKee said the program was a significant step towards improving oral health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children but also demonstrated the importance of self-determination.



“This change has been driven by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations within the Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group who have done an incredible job ensuring children are able to access this vital oral disease prevention in a culturally safe environment.”

Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative CEO and LMARG Chair Dallas Widdicombe said: “Aboriginal Health Practitioners are an integral part of the Aboriginal workforce and completion of their FV training is a noteworthy achievement showcasing their dedication in improving oral health outcomes of Aboriginal community.”

VACCHO CEO Jill Gallagher said this is a great example of the importance of shifting to a preventative health focus – and of putting Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands to support thriving, healthy Communities.

“I’d like to pay tribute to the incredible Aboriginal Health Practitioners for being bold and brave and the dedication they have shown in looking after the health and wellbeing of Community,” she said.

Jaydene Burzacott, Practice Manager for Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative, who was the very first Victorian Aboriginal Health Practitioner to successfully complete the training to use fluoride varnish, said kids will be able to receive fluoride varnish from practitioners who already have a rapport with the community.

“This is shown to improve the health outcomes of the community and will contribute to better overall health of the children that are receiving the fluoride varnish treatment in the community,” she said.

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Dental Health Services Victoria is the lead oral health agency in Victoria. We provide oral health services through The Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne and in partnership with over 50 community dental agencies throughout the state. We also run statewide programs, invest in oral health research, advise the government on oral health policy and support the education of future oral health professionals.