- Dental care

Bad teeth begin to bite

Mercury (Hobart) · 19 Jun 2024 · 18

Our teeth are parts of our bodies that we tend to take for granted. When they are healthy and working, everything is fine – we can eat and drink comfortably and, apart from brushing them twice a day, we tend not to give them a second thought.

But as anyone who has had the misfortune of suffering a bad toothache will tell you, there are few ailments that are more painful or disrupting.

Eating and even drinking can become unpleasant, sleep can be difficult and work and lifestyle suffers.

Not many of us enjoy a trip to the dentist, but for an alarming number of Tasmanians, they don't even have a choice. Thousands who cannot afford to pay for a dentist are missing out on basic dental care through the state's Oral Health Services.

An Auditor-General report into the services tabled in parliament on Tuesday revealed there were about 15,000 waiting to see a publicly funded dentist in 2023.

The median wait for non-urgent dental care was approaching four years, the report said.

The number of children being seen by the service has declined in the past decade.

Auditor-General Martin Thompson said the service had been struggling to meet demand since Covid pandemic restrictions, which had had a "significant impact" on care delivery.

Most adults will remember public health advertisements about cleaning their teeth for two minutes at each end of the day, but today there is little evidence of any public campaigns.

Mr Thompson said that current funding was weighted towards treatment and recommended more be spent on prevention. It makes perfect sense.

If we can teach children and young adults good dental hygiene habits early in life, there are likely to be fewer and less severe problems to deal with later on.

Good teeth and oral health are basic building blocks to keep Tasmanians healthy and happy.

Oral health should not be underestimated or underfunded.