

Cath and MCHS client, Nicolas at the MCHS dental clinic in Brunswick



Dental Health Services Victoria was part of a pilot program aimed at improving access to free dental care for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Find out more on page 18.

## COMMUNITY ORAL HEALTH CHAMPION



### Work with homeless makes Cath Flanagan the 2015 Community Oral Health Champion

Merri Community Health Services (MCHS) is leading the way in providing homeless support services in Melbourne's north.

The no barriers approach provides free dental care to homeless people.

This year's Community Oral Health Champion Catherine Flanagan, or Cath as she is known, led the new initiative which helps homeless people access and navigate the health system as a priority of care client, with the help of partnering agency, the Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS).

"Homeless people experience many barriers in accessing support, including the lack of a home address impacting on access to the health system and low self-esteem, as many feel they are being judged or will be denied care," Cath said.

According to data from Homelessness Australia, there are more than 22,000 homeless people in Victoria.

MCHS Team Leader Kerri Collier said Cath first approached MCHS in 2012 with the aim of building links between their dental service and

Royal District Nursing Service Homeless Person's Program.

"Prior to Cath approaching MCHS the dental service was treating very few homeless or at risk of being homeless clients. The few clients that the service was treating were often only attending the service if they were experiencing severe pain and the fail-to-attend rate was high," explained Kerri.

"Very few clients committed to a full course of care with a high chance of clients getting lost in the system and falling through the cracks due to the difficulty and stress associated with homelessness. Cath's drive to improve outcomes for clients has been inspirational, as she goes above and beyond to improve their oral health and more importantly, the lives of the young people she works with."

Cath explored how the MCHS dental team engaged with homeless clients, educating the team regarding the barriers many clients experience when seeking health care. Cath's commitment resulted in offering a more flexible service which focused on the client rather than the dentistry.

"Cath supported the dental team in making these changes which were vital to the success of the project. There have been many fantastic outcomes not only for the clients but also for the dental team," said Kerri.

"Team members have a sense of job satisfaction and pride due to the results of the partnership. The failure to attend rate is low and clients are now completing a full course of care. Cath was able to support clients with transport but more importantly she has provided the support which has empowered and enabled clients to make decisions to improve their oral health. Cath is now advocating for other homeless services, by building similar partnerships with local community health services and other agencies to also improve oral health outcomes for vulnerable populations.

"It's nice to be able to do something you are really passionate about and be recognised for it."

We want to hear from you

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