Improving oral health of people with intellectual disability

By DTI

MELBOURNE, Victoria, Australia: People with intellectual disability face various social, conceptual and other challenges that affect their overall health and well-being. Some of these challenges may also affect oral health.

In order to educate dental practitioners on the issue and to improve access to dental care for individuals with intellectual disabilities, the Inclusion Designlab has published a guide that is aimed at fostering collaboration between medical providers, key support professionals, accommodation services and families, and identifying and subsequently treating oral health diseases more effectively.

According to the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, almost one in five Australians reported living with disability in 2015 and a child was diagnosed with an intellectual disability every 2 hours. Having an intellectual disability may affect a person’s participation in the community, financial status, level of education attained, employment opportunities and intellectual functioning. According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, a branch of the US National Institutes of Health, people with intellectual disability also suffer from untreated dental caries and a high prevalence of gingivitis. Other oral health problems include a higher risk of malocclusion, missing permanent teeth and poor oral health habits.

The guide for dental practitioners was developed by Inclusion Melbourne, Monash Health’s Centre for Developmental Disability Health, the Australian Dental Association, the Australian Society of Special Care in Dentistry and other representatives from the health sector. It details main components, protocols and recommendations for health professionals and family members that pertain to oral health and intellectual disability. Besides offering general information on the disorder, the guide offers dental practitioners clear guidance on how to behave during a dental visit, informs them about the possible conditions that could be detected in patients with intellectual disability and recommends suitable treatment pathways and strategies to achieve desirable health outcomes.

As individuals with intellectual disability may not always be able to communicate and express themselves clearly, the guide also recommends how to facilitate and improve communication between dental practitioners and people with disability. Finally, it includes forms that aid effective planning between support professionals, dentists and medical practitioners.