

# From pain to empowerment: Rethinking oral health as a human right in South Africa

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When we think about human rights, oral health rarely takes centre stage. Yet, the reality is that a healthy mouth is not a privilege but a fundamental component of overall wellbeing. In South Africa, where disparities in healthcare access persist, it's time we reframe oral health as a human right – a right that empowers individuals, strengthens communities and builds a healthier nation.

## The overlooked link between oral health and quality of life

Oral health is often underestimated in its importance. It's more than just teeth and gums; it's about eating, speaking and living with confidence. Poor oral health can lead to chronic pain, malnutrition and even systemic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes. Beyond the physical toll, it impacts mental health, self-esteem and social interactions. For too many South Africans, this hidden epidemic diminishes the quality of life.

The question we must ask is: why is oral health not treated with the same urgency as other health concerns?

## Barriers to access in South Africa

South Africa's healthcare system reflects the broader inequalities in our society. While some enjoy access to state-of-the-art dental care, millions – particularly in rural and underserved communities – struggle to access even basic services. High costs, long travel distances and a shortage of



skilled dental professionals compound the problem, leaving vulnerable populations at a disadvantage.

Children in these communities are particularly affected. Dental decay is the most common chronic disease among children, yet many go untreated, leading to pain, missed school days and lifelong consequences. Adults, too, suffer in silence, often prioritising other financial obligations over their oral health.

## Oral health as a catalyst for empowerment

Rethinking oral health as a human right means recognising its transformative potential. When individuals have access to quality dental care, they're not just healthier – they're more confident, productive and engaged members of society. A smile is more than a personal asset; it's a tool for empowerment.

For example, consider the economic implications. Job seekers with poor oral health often face stigma and discrimination, impacting their chances of securing employment. By addressing oral health inequities, we're not just improving individual lives – we're fostering economic inclusion and reducing societal disparities.

## The role of advocacy and collaboration

To make oral health a reality for all, we need systemic change. This starts with advocacy. Policymakers must prioritise oral health in national healthcare strategies, ensuring it receives adequate funding and attention. Educational campaigns are equally crucial, raising awareness about the importance of preventive care and demystifying dental treatments.

Collaboration is key. Government, private sector stakeholders, nonprofits and professional bodies such as the South African Dental Association (SADA) must work together to bridge gaps in access. Mobile dental clinics, subsidised care programmes and community-based initiatives can bring services to those who need them most.

## A vision for the future

Imagine a South Africa where every child can go to school without dental pain, where adults can pursue opportunities without the burden of oral health stigma, and where communities thrive because their basic healthcare needs are met. This vision is within our reach, but it requires a collective commitment to change.

At SADA, we believe that oral health is not a luxury – it's a right. By advocating for equitable access, promoting preventive care and empowering individuals through education, we can turn this vision into reality. Together, let's move from pain to empowerment, building a healthier, more equitable South Africa – one smile at a time.