DOI: 10.18311/ijsdps.1.1.2026.64-67 Vol 1(1), 2026 | pp. 64-67

The International Journal of Sports Dentistry and Performance Science

Report Article

South African Sports Dentistry Association - Inaugural Conference Report Advancing Oral Health in High-Performance Sport

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Article Received: 20-05-2026
Article Revised: 20-05-2026
Article Accepted: 20-05-2026

Abstract

The South African Sports Dentistry Association (SASDA) was formally established by five founding practitioners united by a shared vision: to embed oral health as a recognised, evidence-based pillar of high-performance sport in South Africa. The inauguration was marked by the First South African Sports Dentistry Conference, which brought together dental professionals, sports physicians, and performance scientists to define a strategic framework for the discipline's future.

1. BACKGROUND AND ASSOCIATION INCEPTION

The involvement of dental professionals in sport has historically been confined to managing dentofacial trauma at the pitch-side. Yet a growing body of evidence makes clear that oral health exerts far broader influence on athlete wellbeing, systemic health, training availability, and competitive performance.

Recognising this gap in the South African sports medicine landscape, five practitioners from diverse dental and medical backgrounds came together to establish the South African Sports Dentistry Association (SASDA). The Association's founding principles are rooted in prevention, performance, education, and multidisciplinary collaboration — aligning with both contemporary

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sports medicine models and South Africa's National Oral Health Policy and Strategy 2024–2034.

2. THE FIRST SOUTH AFRICAN SPORTS DENTISTRY CONFERENCE

The inaugural conference represented a landmark moment for oral healthcare within the South African and international sporting landscape. Rather than limiting discussion to trauma management, the conference deliberately framed sports dentistry as a holistic, performance-enabling discipline spanning screening, prevention, rehabilitation, and multidisciplinary team integration.

2.1 Key Themes Explored

The conference synthesised discussion across five principal themes that together define the strategic direction of SASDA:

- Oral health as a determinant of athlete performance and systemic wellbeing.
- Dentofacial trauma management and standardised pitch-side protocols.
- Instrumented mouthguards (iMGs) as a bridge between oral protection and data science.
- Nutritional risk factors for dental disease in high-performance sport.
- Education, research, and integration within established sports medicine structures.

3. ORAL HEALTH AS A PERFORMANCE AND PREVENTION ENABLER

A central finding reinforced throughout the conference is that elite athletes present with dental caries, erosive tooth wear, and periodontal disease at rates that consistently exceed those of the general population. These conditions are not merely dental inconveniences but they contribute to systemic inflammation, pain, increased infection risk, and illness burden, each of which can compromise training continuity and competitive readiness.

Crucially, evidence now shows that these patterns emerge early. Studies of youth academy footballers reveal high levels of dental caries, gingival inflammation, and periodontal disease, underscoring the importance of integrating oral health screening into athlete development pathways from an early stage.

The nutritional demands of high-performance sport further compound oral health risk. Frequent carbohydrate intake, energy supplementation, and repeated exposure to acidic sports drinks were identified as routine yet modifiable risk factors. These findings position oral healthcare as a shared, cross-disciplinary responsibility rather than an isolated clinical concern.

4. TRAUMA MANAGEMENT AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

4.1 Dentofacial Trauma and Pitch-Side Protocols

Dental and maxillofacial trauma remain prevalent in contact and collision sports. The conference highlighted under-preparedness among sports physicians for complex dental injuries, and called for standardised pitch-side response protocols and clearer referral pathways between medical and dental professionals. Sports dentists are positioned to play an active clinical and educational role within event-based interdisciplinary teams.

4.2 Instrumented Mouthguards (iMGs)

Instrumented mouthguards were highlighted as an exciting convergence of oral protection, athlete safety, and performance data science. Beyond passive injury prevention, iMGs can provide real-time surveillance data on head impact exposure, contributing to return-to-play decision-making and long-term athlete safety research. The implementation of iMG regulations

across sporting codes creates a timely opportunity for sports dentists to lead on athlete education, device fitting, and data interpretation.

Advances in digital intraoral scanning technologies were also discussed as tools that enhance clinical communication, particularly for travelling athletes who require continuity of care across multiple healthcare environments.

5. CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

The following outcomes were established as the strategic direction for SASDA and the integration of sports dentistry into South African high-performance sport:

1	Establish SASDA as the recognised professional body for sports dentistry in South Africa, aligned with national sports medicine governance frameworks.
2	Develop and publish a standardised oral health screening protocol for use within high-performance and elite athlete environments.
3	Create and distribute pitch-side dental trauma response guidelines for sports physicians, physiotherapists, and team medical staff.
4	Initiate a national registry of athlete oral health data to support epidemiological research and evidence-based best practice.
5	Integrate oral health education into existing sports medicine and high-performance coaching training programmes.
6	Pursue formal integration of sports dentists into multidisciplinary high-performance teams at provincial and national sporting bodies.
7	Champion iMG adoption and regulation compliance across SA sporting codes, positioning sports dentists as the clinical lead for device fitting and data interpretation.
8	Establish an annual conference and peer-reviewed publication pipeline to sustain momentum and build international credibility.

6. WAY FORWARD

The establishment of SASDA and the success of the inaugural conference represent the beginning of a sustained, strategic effort. The immediate priorities for the Association are:

Short-Term (0–12 Months)

- Formalise SASDA's governance structure, membership criteria, and code of practice.
- Engage South African sports governing bodies (SA Rugby, SAFA, CSA, Athletics SA) to explore integration of sports dentistry services.
- Publish the inaugural conference report in a peer-reviewed sports medicine journal to establish academic credibility.
- Design and pilot an oral health screening programme within a high-performance sporting academy.

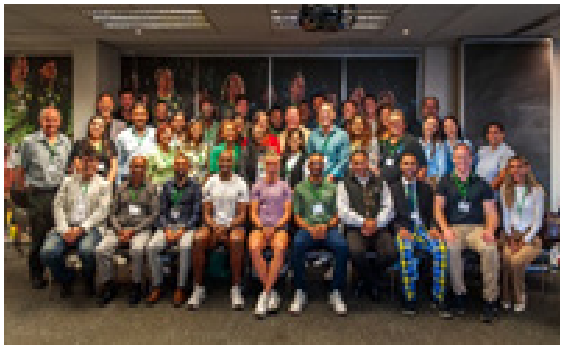
Medium-Term (1–3 Years)

- Build a national network of accredited sports dentists with standardised training and continuing professional development pathways.
- Commission South African-specific research on the prevalence and performance impact of oral disease in elite athletes.
- Develop a national sports drinks and nutrition advisory framework informed by dental health evidence.
- Explore iMG pilot programmes in contact sports such as rugby and boxing in partnership with sporting federations.

Long-Term (3+ Years)

- Achieve formal recognition of sports dentistry as a defined subspecialty within South African sports medicine frameworks.
- Establish postgraduate education pathways in sports dentistry in collaboration with South African dental schools.

- Position South Africa as a leading voice in international sports dentistry research and policy development.
- Host a biennial international sports dentistry symposium on the African continent.





7. CONCLUSION

The first South African Sports Dentistry Conference marked a watershed moment for oral healthcare in the national and international sporting arena. Under the leadership of its five founders — Bhavik Ganda, Umair Mohammed, Janesh Ganda, John Haughey, and Imogen Johnson — SASDA has articulated a clear, evidence-informed vision: oral health is not peripheral to athlete performance. It is central to it.

By championing prevention, performance integration, research, and multidisciplinary collaboration, SASDA is committed to transforming the role of the sports dentist in South Africa — from a trauma responder to an indispensable member of the high-performance team.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDINGS

No conflicts of interest declared. No external funding source. All authors approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for the integrity of the work.