

## **Sowing the Seeds of Gum Health at Canterbury Christ Church:**

### **Connecting Oral and Systemic Health Across Campus and Community**

At Canterbury, Gum Health Day 2026 has been used as a catalyst to begin embedding prevention, oral-systemic health awareness, and interprofessional collaboration into the identity of a brand-new dental programme. This represents a historic milestone for both CCCU and the wider region, marking not only the university's first Gum Health campaign, but also the development of the first dental programme for the university and surrounding area. The initiative has been shaped by a recognition that many rural and coastal communities within the region face significant barriers to accessing dental care and are frequently described as “dental deserts,” with longstanding workforce shortages, oral health inequalities, and limited local training opportunities. As a result, the campaign has focused not only on raising awareness of gum health, but on helping establish a new prevention-focused healthcare culture rooted in accessibility, collaboration, and civic responsibility. Since February, we have intentionally used every opportunity to raise the profile of gum health across the wider university and healthcare environment, during open days, staff engagement activities, leadership events, networking opportunities with Allied Health Professional (AHP) programmes, and awareness discussions across campus. Our focus has been on positioning oral health as an essential component of whole-person healthcare rather than a standalone dental issue, while making conversations around gum health more approachable, accessible, and less intimidating for everybody. Educational displays, oral health resources, product samples, and informal engagement activities have been used to encourage discussion around prevention, self-care, health literacy, and the links between oral and systemic health. To help create visibility and encourage conversation, the dental team at CCCU also created a light-hearted promotional video using giant toothbrushes, props, and interactive activities to raise awareness of gum health during multiple university events and demonstrate the team's commitment to making oral health conversations engaging, approachable, and inclusive.

Rather than delivering a single awareness event linked only to Gum Health Day, this initiative has been intentionally designed as a long-term, continuous educational and public engagement campaign embedded throughout the academic year. The project combines repeated visibility campaigns, interprofessional education, student-led prevention activities, community outreach, oral-systemic health advocacy, behavioural communication training, and early intervention messaging into one evolving initiative. Planned initiatives include monthly Gum Health events across campus for staff and students, “TED Talk”-style sessions to stimulate wider conversations around oral-systemic health, collaborative engagement with AHP students and educators, and ongoing partnership-building during future university open days to strengthen interprofessional education from the outset rather than retrospectively. Undergraduate

students will also be encouraged to act as oral health ambassadors by delivering awareness activities both on campus and throughout the wider region, particularly within rural and coastal communities where barriers to care, oral health inequalities, and limited access to dental services remain significant. The initiative will progressively extend into schools, care homes, and community centres to support prevention-focused education across the lifespan and improve accessibility to oral health messaging for underserved populations. Through repeated exposure, community engagement, and non-judgemental communication, we aim to help students develop confidence initiating meaningful conversations around prevention while creating a continuous pipeline of visibility, education, and advocacy around gum health and oral-systemic wellbeing at Canterbury. By creating regular and repeated touchpoints across the university, healthcare programmes, and wider community, the campaign aims to normalise conversations around gum health and ensure that oral health becomes part of everyday healthcare conversations rather than an isolated dental topic. The initiative is designed not only to educate, but to create a sustainable culture shift in how oral health is perceived, discussed, and integrated within both healthcare education and the wider community. Our long-term aim is to create a scalable and sustainable model for embedding prevention, oral-systemic health awareness, and interprofessional collaboration into university culture and community engagement. For us, Gum Health Day is not a single event in the calendar, it is an ongoing movement rooted in prevention, accessibility, collaboration, civic responsibility, and the belief that oral health belongs in every healthcare conversation.