The Department of Prosthodontics at the University of Pretoria is one of the very few centres in South Africa where specialised maxillofacial prosthodontics services are offered to patients who do not have access to a medical aid scheme. Maxillofacial prosthodontics is a speciality of dentistry that deals with the rehabilitation of patients’ defects of the head and neck region. These range from minor to major functional disabilities combined with cosmetic disfigurement. The Department mostly serves patients referred from the Steve Biko Academic Hospital and from many of the surrounding clinics in Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga.

The patients are mostly adults who suffer from oral or head and neck defects due to trauma, cancer or natural causes. Traumatic injuries include gunshot wounds, injuries resulting from violence or motor vehicle accidents, workplace injuries, as well as injury from fire or domestic violence. In the case of head and neck cancers, patients often require major surgery to remove tumours that would otherwise be life threatening.

A person who loses facial structures has to deal with a number of practical problems. Chewing and swallowing food is limited by the loss of a part or all of the upper or lower jaw, the tongue or the palate. This leads to health problems, such as poor nutrition and infections, as well as social embarrassment when eating in company.

Communication is hampered because speech is impaired, making it difficult for others to understand, and sufferers often find it difficult to obtain work or interact socially.

The Department of Prosthodontics at the University of Pretoria works with a team of specialists, including maxillofacial surgeons, plastic surgeons, ear, nose and throat surgeons, and (in the case of cancer) oncologists and radiotherapists. Following surgery, the prosthodontics work includes implanting jaw prostheses and manufacturing dental prostheses. Prosthodontists also work on the construction of prosthetic eyes, ears and noses.