

TARGETED DENTAL FUNDING AND EXPENDITURE

The Australian Dental Association (ADA) has called on the Federal, State and Territory Governments to urgently act on dental care following a survey released by Australia Fair that shows dental care in Australia is in crisis.

The research¹ revealed:

- 46% of people reported that it would be difficult for them to pay for basic preventative treatment today;
- 46% of people stated that the cost of dental care influences their decision to see a dentist regularly;
- 75% of people believe the Federal Government must at least share the funding for dental care and only 5% think it is a State Government responsibility alone; and
- 23% of people say they haven't seen a dentist in over two years.

These statistics are disturbing as reports continually suggest that Australians are ignoring obtaining dental treatment because they cannot afford the cost of basic care. However, the ADA believes that Australians are not giving their dental health the priority it deserves in their spending. Bureau of Statistics data has shown that the majority of Australians are spending more on haircuts than they are on dental health (and considerably more on hair care products than dental care products). Poor oral health creates a susceptibility to suffer poor general health. Poor oral health has been linked to arthritis, coronary heart disease, diabetes and cardiovascular disease to varying degrees. Maintenance of regular dental care is a sound investment in overall health and this is the message that has to be heard and acted upon.

There are over 650,000 Australians on waiting lists for general dental care from public dental services and the average time on a waiting list is 27 months. Government funding of dental care needs to be increased and targeted if Governments are to play an effective role in the improvement of oral health delivery to needy Australians.

In 2004-05 consumers contributed nearly \$3.4 billion or 67% of funding for dental services, compared to \$953 million from Government (19%)² and \$701 million from private health insurance funds (14%).³

According to Dr John Matthews, Federal President of the ADA, "It's time for Governments to act on and implement the initiatives outlined in *Australia's National Oral Health Plan*, signed off by all government Health Ministers." Providing adequate targeted funding for the delivery of dental care to the financially disadvantaged is listed as a priority area.

*Action Area 4.2 — "increase in funding to public oral health services to enable concession card holders living in the community to have timely access to preventively focused dental care that meets the minimum standard benchmarks for oral health service provision."*⁴

This coincides with ADA policy that states Government assistance should be directed preferentially to those in greatest financial and oral health need.⁵

A case in point is the Federal Government's latest announcement of the expansion of the existing Medicare Enhanced Primary Care program for patients with chronic and complex conditions. In the May Federal Budget it was announced that chronically ill patients with complex dental problems could claim a rebate of \$2000 per annum. Eligible patients will now in fact be entitled to a rebate of \$4000 over two years which will enable a more comprehensive dental treatment to be delivered.

Whilst this increase is welcomed the ADA remains disappointed that this funding is universally available to Australians rather than the limited funding being targeted to the financially disadvantaged. The program will only partly relieve the pressure on public dental waiting lists.

The ADA will continue to lobby and press Governments to increase their assistance for financially disadvantaged Australians to enable them to receive basic dental care. Political will and leadership is needed. As 90% of dental disease is preventable, the provision of a course of basic care would be a very sound investment in the oral health of those in need.

In the ADA's 2007-08 Pre-Budget Submission⁶ it recommended only a modest amount of expenditure (\$310,345,000—\$387,345,000) to significantly improve the oral health of the Australian population.

"... Australians are not giving their dental health the priority it deserves in their spending."

To view the ADA's Pre-Budget Submission go to:

http://www.ada.org.au/App_CmsLib/Media/Lib/0703/M52929_v1_2007-2008%20ADA%20Federal%20Budget%20Submission.pdf

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References

1. Roy Morgan Research conducted on July 4-5 2007.
2. This \$953 million is comprised of \$450 million by Commonwealth and \$503 million by State and Local Governments.
3. AIHW. 'Health Expenditure Australia 2004-05', p 105.
4. 'Healthy Mouths Health Lives, Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2004-2013'.
5. ADA Policy Statement 1.5 – 'Principles of Government Funding of Oral Health Care'.
6. Australian Dental Association (2006) *2006-07 Pre-Budget Submission*, 15 November 2006.