



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION INC.

## DENTAL WORKFORCE REVIEW IS TIMELY TO ADDRESS RURAL HEALTH WORKFORCE CRISIS

The Australian Dental Association welcomes news that the Australian Government is determined to improve the health of rural, regional and remote communities, during a recent roundtable meeting with peak rural health professionals and consumer organisations.

The Minister for Health and Ageing, Nicola Roxon, told the National Rural Health Workforce Roundtable that an audit of health workforce shortages in rural areas would be completed shortly. The Government will invest in rural health to make sure families in rural, regional and remote Australia get the health services they need and deserve.

A range of practical and cost-effective solutions to get and keep more health professionals in rural and remote Australia were raised at the meeting. A key message was that rural communities do not just need one type of health professional — they will benefit most from a multi-disciplinary mix of doctors, nurses, midwives, Aboriginal Health Workers, dentists and allied health professionals if they are to enjoy better access to local health care. This mix would also help make rural practice more sustainable.

The ADA is pleased with this measure and believes it is essential the audit be extended to the dental workforce. We have continually lobbied for a high level assessment of the future dental workforce structure and training. Australians living in rural and remote areas have comparatively poor oral health compared to their urban counterparts due to lack of access to dental care. It is reported that there are over 500,000 people on waiting lists for public dental care and rural people are likely to be over-represented on these waiting lists.

The ADA has been calling on the Federal Government to

address the maldistribution of the current dental workforce which has been negatively impacting on the delivery of services in areas of need such as in rural, regional and remote parts of Australia for some time now. According to the ADA Federal President, Dr John Matthews, "A dental workforce review is needed to best identify how investment can be most effectively made to address the future."

Greater investment needed to improve the dental health care delivery for all Australians has been highlighted in the Productivity Commission's report on Government Services 2008.

In the report at 'Availability of public dentists' it states:

*"A dental workforce review is needed to best identify how investment can be most effectively made to address the future."*

*Dr John Matthews*

*"The availability (or supply) of public dentists by region affects people's access to public dental services, particularly in rural and remote areas. Low availability can result in increased travel distance to a dentist and increased waiting times to see a dentist."*

*The indicator is defined as the number of full time equivalent (FTE) public dentists per 100,000 people by region.*

*In 2005 there were more FTE public dentists per 100,000 people in major cities than in regional or remote areas for all states and territories (figure 11.7; table 11A.14)."*

Statistics also revealed that Victoria and Tasmania have a below average number of public dentists. While the national average is approximately seven public dentists for every 100,000 people, Victoria has only five and Tasmania has three.

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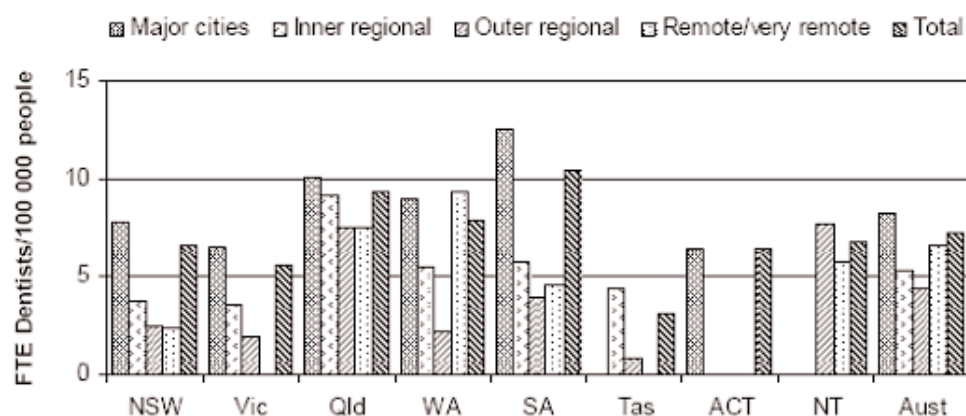
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Figure 11.7 Availability of public dentists, 2005<sup>a, b, c</sup>



<sup>a</sup> FTE based on 40-hour week. <sup>b</sup> There were no public dentists in remote and very remote areas in Victoria or Tasmania. There were no public dentists in inner regional areas in the ACT. <sup>c</sup> Tasmania had no major cities. The ACT had no outer regional, or remote and very remote, areas. The NT had no major cities or inner regional areas.

Source: AIHW (unpublished); table 11A.14.

Table 11A.14

Availability of public dentists (per 100,000 people)

	<i>NSW</i>	<i>Vic</i>	<i>Qld</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>Tas</i>	<i>ACT</i>	<i>NT</i>	<i>Aust</i>
FTE dentists per 100 000 population (a)									
2005									
Major cities	7.8	6.5	10.1	8.9	12.6	..	6.4	..	<b>8.3</b>
Inner regional	3.8	3.6	9.2	5.5	5.8	4.4	..	..	<b>5.3</b>
Outer regional	2.5	1.9	7.5	2.2	3.9	0.8	..	7.7	<b>4.3</b>
Remote & very remote	2.4	-	7.5	9.4	4.6	-	..	5.7	<b>6.6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>10.4</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>7.2</b>

(a) FTE based on 40 hour week

.. Not applicable. - Nil or rounded to zero.

Source: AIHW (unpublished)

Federal Labor has been 'championing' the need to alleviate the current dental crisis in Australia. The newly elected Government now has the opportunity to show this commitment. If it is to introduce plans to improve the nation's dental health, it needs to ensure that the dental workforce is adequate and well distributed to meet the demand. The audit will be a necessary first step in the process.