

FEDERAL DENTAL FUNDING 2008

With the Federal Budget being released on 13 May, this edition of the *National Dental Update* highlights the Australian Dental Association's (ADA) proposals to the Government for 2008-09. The ADA believes that the Commonwealth must take a leadership role and work co-operatively with the States and Territories to deliver basic dental services to the financially disadvantaged to ensure that the minimum standard of dental health is achieved throughout the community.

Priority areas

The ADA's 2008-09 pre-Budget submission to the Department of Treasury identifies a number of priority areas where investment by the Commonwealth Government would improve the oral health of the Australian population. These include:

- Additional places for dental students at Australian dental schools; increased subsidies to encourage dentists to work in areas of need including regional, rural and remote Australia and the public service; and financial assistance provided directly to Schools of Dentistry to assist with recruitment and retention of academic staff to alleviate shortages in the current academic dental workforce.
- A Commonwealth-funded National Oral Health Programme to improve access to dental care for those groups in the community who are most financially disadvantaged.
- A greater focus on the oral health of Australia's indigenous population, including oral health training for Aboriginal health workers, increased access to fluoridated water supplies and the creation of Australian Government Intervention (AGI) Dental Teams to target remote indigenous children.
- Funding for dental care to older people, especially residents living in aged care accommodation.
- Additional funding so all children below 12 years of age who come from families which suffer economic hardship can access and receive an oral examination and treatment. Increase access to school dental services and increase oral health promotion that targets adolescents.
- Greater assistance for people with special needs, including training carers and health workers, subsidising dental treatment

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in private practice, building special facilities in public clinics and educating and developing the capacity of the dental workforce to provide care for special needs patients.

- Maintenance of realistic fee levels to ensure ongoing delivery for veterans and their entitled dependants.
- Funding, through additional MBS items, for treatment for congenital anomalies of the dentition for children and adults.
- Funding for a dental health information campaign aimed at 12-17 year-olds to coincide with the introduction of the new Teen Dental Plan.
- The creation of the position of Federal Dental Advisors.

As the table below shows, the ADA has highlighted those areas where an additional \$416 million would increase access to dental care, reduce the long waiting lists, alleviate pain and discomfort and improve the oral health and general wellbeing of those in the community who are most in need. This is a modest amount of expenditure required to achieve such significant results. There is still a long way to go until all Australians have the degree of dental health they deserve for a country of our wealth.

In the past, Federal Government funding for dental services has been mediocre. In 2005-06, direct expenditure on dental services by the Commonwealth was \$96 million. Commonwealth subsidies for dental care via the 30% rebate for private health insurance was \$384 million. These figures are relatively small given the total dental expenditure in Australia was about \$5.3 billion. The majority of this expenditure came from individuals (\$3,573 billion) and from health insurance funds (\$760 million).¹

Investment in dental health care is essential. Dental treatment is not an option – it is a necessity for maintaining good health, eating and socialising and as such should be available to all members of the community. Over the past year 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.

ADA recommendations for additional expenditure in 2008-09

Item	Additional funding for 2008-09 (\$)
Dental Workforce and Higher Education	\$5,320,000
Commonwealth-Funded National Oral Health Programme	\$197,000,000
Indigenous Oral Health	\$2,000,000
Older People	\$10,550,000
Children and Adolescents	\$153,500,000
People with Special Needs	\$29,750,000
Department of Veterans' Affairs	\$4,500,000
Additional Items for Medicare - Anomalies of the Dentition	\$9,452,000
Oral Health Promotion	\$4,500,000
Federal Dental Advisors	\$335,000
TOTAL	\$416,907,000

For full details of the ADA's 2008-09 pre-Budget submission visit www.ada.org.au/newsroom/article,documentid,110948.aspx

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Reference

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Health expenditure Australia 2005-06*.

