

DENTAL HEALTH DELIVERY NEEDS NOT MET BY FEDERAL BUDGET

Labor's first and much anticipated Federal Budget has finally arrived. It provided an opportunity for the new Government to show its level of commitment to alleviating Australia's dental health care crisis. Sadly however, the announcements fall 'short of the mark' and simply don't go far enough.

Whilst the Australian Dental Association (ADA) welcomes targeted federal funds for dental care to financially disadvantaged Australians, it is concerned that the newly created Commonwealth Dental Health Program and the Teen Dental Plan should have been better linked.

Labor's dental health announcements included:

- Commonwealth Dental Health Program (CDHP) – \$290 million will be provided over three years to State and Territory governments, aimed at reducing public dental waiting lists. One million additional consultations and treatments will be funded for Australians needing dental treatment.
- Teen Dental Plan – \$490.7 million will be invested over five years to help around 1.1 million Australian teenagers look after their teeth. Teenagers aged 12-17 in families receiving Family Tax Benefit A, and teenagers in the same age group receiving Youth Allowance or Abstudy, will be eligible to claim up to \$150 per year (through the newly established Dental Benefits Schedule) towards the cost of an annual preventative dental check-up.

Commonwealth Dental Health Program – “too little for too few”

“The States and Territories of Australia have failed to meet their obligations to ensure proper delivery of dental care to disadvantaged Australians for far too long. The Rudd Government had the opportunity to rectify some of the specific deficiencies that existed by introducing some coordinated plans that could be built upon or modified to meet future needs,” said Dr John Matthews, Federal President of the ADA.

“Instead it has provided the State/Territory Health Services with additional funding (less than provided back in 1996) to prop up schemes that have not delivered to date.”

The ADA had advised the Government that the previous CDHP was deficient. It failed to seek accountability from the States as to their contributions to the provision of dental health. Despite the ADA's calls for the creation of an improved CDHP seeking accountability from the States as a prerequisite for funding, such calls appear to have been ignored.

The ADA welcomes the Federal Government finally taking some responsibility for dental health delivery. However, it must ensure that its further contribution is matched by the States and not used as an offset to State and Territory funding.

The CDHP delivers little for too few people and will not be effective.

Instead of having one global CDHP providing general financial assistance to the States/Territories, the ADA calls for the

Government to identify specific areas for improvement – such as dental care for the aged or those with special needs – and focus on funding and giving attention to these areas.

Teen Dental Plan – Some good, some bad – “no follow through”

This Plan is basic and has some merit as it stresses prevention. With refinement it could deliver much more.

When advised of this proposal, the ADA called on the Government to consider expanding eligibility under the scheme to a wider age group as teens already had relatively good dental care available through State/Territory school programmes or through the public sector.

The ADA suggested that Australians in their early twenties have shown a significant susceptibility to dental decay. Incentives for private health cover are not available for this age group and many have moved away from parental support. Improving access to dental care would therefore have directed care to a targeted group that needs special attention.

“Unfortunately the failure to address this will mean that many in this susceptible group will now go uninsured and will not be able to access the degree of care they require”, said Dr Matthews.

A \$150 voucher for a dental check-up to an eligible teenager will put many teens on the right path to dental health. However, the scheme will fail those that have serious dental problems. If significant problems are detected, the voucher won't allow for a complete course of treatment. These teenagers will have to go back onto the public sector waiting lists where they may have to wait years for their treatment to be completed.

This is a serious defect. The Teen Dental Plan only serves the moderately healthy and fails to cater for those with serious oral care needs.

The ADA calls for:

- Expansion of the eligible group to people up to age 25.
- Funding to be made available to treat those patients in the private sector, who on examination under the Teen Dental Plan are found to be in a state of bad dental health, to be treated quickly and not to be required to return to the long public sector waiting lists.

ADA Dental Plan

The ADA's budget submission with a modest increase in funding of a little over \$400 million offers a comprehensive plan that has the support of the profession. Some initiatives include funding for prevention and the introduction of an intern year to boost the numbers of public sector dentists and allied personnel.

A copy of the ADA's submission can be viewed at www.ada.org.au under Items of Interest.