

ENHANCED PRIMARY CARE DENTAL SCHEME

Australians may once again be eligible for Medicare dental rebates worth up to \$4,250 after the Senate recently rejected the Rudd Government's attempt to close down the dental Enhanced Primary Care (EPC) Scheme. Those who will benefit include patients with chronic and complex illnesses where dental treatment will alleviate their illness. But the question is for how long will the Scheme continue and what will be the consequences for dentists and patients who begin, but then may not be able to complete, a course of treatment.

In announcing displeasure and annoyance with the Senate's decision not to close down the Scheme, the Rudd Labor Government advised Australians that the Government is determined to close the Scheme at the earliest opportunity and that there will be no transition period after the closure date during which patients would be able to complete treatment under the Scheme. Health Minister Roxon's letter to dentists reads:

You should be aware that, subject to Parliament's agreement, the Government intends to close the chronic disease dental scheme to all patients at the earliest opportunity once Parliament resumes.

Decisions on the care of a patient should, of course, be made on the basis of what is clinically appropriate and necessary. Practitioners should, however, be aware of the anticipated funding changes and consider carefully whether to commence a course of dental treatment for a patient under the chronic disease dental items. Medicare rebates for dental services under these chronic disease items will not be available for any patients once the scheme has been closed. The Government does not anticipate there will be any transition period after the closure date during which patients would be able to complete treatment.

The ADA believes that the failure to provide a transition period during which a complete and proper dental treatment plan can be delivered is very short sighted and they deserve strong reprimand for being seen to compromise a normal course of dental care. The ADA says no patient can embark on the complex care plans required for the chronically ill with any certainty that the treatment will be covered by the EPC Scheme.

The Minister's 'threat' that dentists should not participate in the Scheme, for fear that patients will become disqualified for eligibility for funding for treatment once the Government closes the Scheme, effectively makes the continuation of the Scheme ineffective. Without actually closing the Scheme the Government has orchestrated a quasi closure by creating a scenario that will prevent all but the simplest treatment plans being able to be completed.

The future of the Scheme seems uncertain. A new Senate will be formed in late August and the Minister may have other strategies in mind.

ADA's position

Since the Scheme was introduced, the ADA has remained dissatisfied that the funding is universally available under Medicare to the wealthy and poor alike rather than being targeted to the financially disadvantaged.

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Nicola Roxon

An effective compromise between the conflicting positions of the major political parties would be to limit the eligibility under any Federal funding programme to financially disadvantaged Australians. If funding could be targeted to the financially disadvantaged, this would prove to be an effective way to not only provide many more Australians with access to dental care, but would also help alleviate the dire position of the States and Territories in relation to their dental waiting lists.

In addition, the ADA calls on the Government to immediately allow the continuing EPC Scheme to be effective until possible closure by reversing its earlier announcement not to allow a transition period to closure. The Government must re-state an intention to provide a reasonable transition period for the Scheme to allow eligible patients time to effectively complete the treatment plans required to help overcome their chronic condition.

Dental treatment is not an option – it is a necessity for maintaining good health and as such should be available to all members of the community.