

FEDERAL DENTAL FUNDING

With the Federal Budget only months away, we here highlight the ADA's proposals to the Government for 2007-08.

The link between oral health and disease and general health is more widely acknowledged than ever before. There is increasing concern in relation to dental caries in children. The dental needs of many in the Australian population remain acute, and require urgent attention.¹

Priority areas

The ADA's 2007-08 Pre-Budget Submission² to the Department of Treasury has identified a number of priority areas to improve the oral health of the Australian population. These are:

- Additional places for dental students, especially local students, at Australian dental schools and increased subsidies to encourage dentists to work in areas of need, including rural and remote Australia and the public sector.³
- A Commonwealth-funded Oral Health Program to increase access to care for those who are economically disadvantaged and in need of dental care.
- A greater focus on the oral health of Australia's Indigenous population, including funding for oral health training for Aboriginal health workers.
- Additional funding for dental care to older people – this includes those living independently in the community and those in residential accommodation.
- Provision of funding so that all children can access and receive an oral examination and treatment. Increase access to school dental services and increase promotion of oral health to children and adolescents.
- Funding, through additional MBS items, for treatment for congenital anomalies of the dentition for children and adults.
- An Australia-wide oral health promotion campaign.
- The creation of the position of Federal Chief Dental Officer.

A modest amount of expenditure is required to achieve these results

Currently, direct expenditure on dental care by the Commonwealth is \$77 million per annum. Commonwealth subsidies for dental care, via the 30% rebate for private health insurance, total \$319 million per annum.⁴ These figures (particularly direct expenditure by the Commonwealth) are small compared to total dental expenditure in Australia which is almost \$4.7 billion per annum, with the bulk of this expenditure (\$3.3 billion) coming from individuals.

As the table below highlights, the ADA has identified areas where an additional \$387 million would significantly reduce waiting lists, increase access to care, alleviate pain and discomfort, and benefit the oral and general health of many in the community. The figure of \$387 million is small when considered in context – it is approximately 3.5% of the projected 2005-06 budget surplus of \$10.8 billion, or 6% of total current dental expenditure.⁵

A focus on treatment and prevention

The ADA's plan for improved oral health has a dual focus – firstly, to provide treatment to those with existing dental disease, and secondly, to develop a national focus on prevention through oral health promotion and disease prevention campaigns. Improved access to treatment and prevention programs are required as the oral health of Australian adults ranks second worst among OECD countries.⁶

While dental caries and periodontal diseases are the first and fifth most prevalent health problems in Australia respectively, oral health promotion programs have an important role to play as 90% of all dental disease is preventable.⁷

ADA RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL EXPENDITURE IN 2007-08

ITEM	ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR 2006-07 (\$)
Dental workforce and higher education	\$4,200,000
Commonwealth-funded National Oral Health Program	\$275,000,000 - \$352,000,000
Indigenous oral health	\$1,000,000
Older people	\$10,550,000
Children and adolescents	\$5,000,000
Additional items for Medicare – anomalies of the dentition	\$9,425,000
Oral health promotion	\$4,000,000
Federal Chief Dental Officer	\$300,000
TOTAL	\$310,345,000 - \$387,345,000

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References

1. Reports suggest waiting list numbers on public dental lists exceed 650,000 people.
 2. Australian Dental Association (2006) *2006-07 Pre-Budget Submission*, 15 November 2006.
 3. See ADA *National Dental Update* (August 2005) for statistics on national distribution of dentists in Australia.
 4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Health Expenditure Australia', Various Years.
 5. See ADA *National Dental Update* (October 2006) for historic data on expenditure.
 6. National Advisory Committee on Oral Health (2004) *Healthy Mouths Healthy Lives: Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2004-2013*, A Committee Established by the Australian Health Ministers' Conference, p. 7.
 7. Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (2001) *Oral Health of Australians: National Planning for Oral Health Improvement*, Final Report, Steering Committee for National Planning for Oral Health.
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