

NATIONAL ORAL HEALTH ALLIANCE

The Australian Dental Association (ADA) has joined forces with 30 community, consumer and other dental groups to reactivate the National Oral Health Alliance. Over 80 members of the Alliance attended Parliament House in Canberra on 20 March 2007 to meet with over 45 politicians.

A clear message was delivered to Federal politicians that urgent action is needed by them to alleviate the considerable distress experienced by the 650,000 financially disadvantaged people currently waiting, in some cases in excess of two years, to receive public dental treatment. It is known that in many instances people on these waiting lists are in considerable pain. The visit coincided with the publication of *Australia's dental generations – The National Survey of Adult Oral Health 2004-06*.¹

The messages delivered by the Alliance were simple:

- The oral health of some Australians is among the worst of the OECD countries.
- Waiting lists for the financially disadvantaged in the public dental sector are unacceptably long.
- Poorer Australians have poorer oral health.
- 30% of Australians say that they avoid or do not visit the dentist because they cannot financially afford to do so.²
- In much of Australia, particularly in rural and remote regions, there are not enough dentists to meet community needs.³
- The failure by governments to act comprehensively in accordance with the National Oral Health Plan has meant that the poor state of dental health delivery has only further deteriorated since the Plan was endorsed by Federal and State Health Ministers in 2004.⁴
- Governments, both State and Federal, need to act together to coordinate delivery of the solutions identified in the Plan. They should not participate in the blame game; shifting responsibility for the problem to the other.

The solution put forward to Canberra was that there needs to be simultaneous action to ensure the following:

1. All people on concession cards have a free basic course of dental care every two years. This preventative health measure would help improve the poor oral health

of people on low incomes and lessen the number of tooth extractions and more expensive treatments needed.

2. The Commonwealth Government provides the funding for this initiative through the States and Territories:

- i. on the condition that the States and Territories bring their own expenditure up to the new level of Commonwealth funding,
- ii. extension of water fluoridation to all communities, and
- iii. ensuring that all children and eligible adults receive one course of general oral health care every two years, and ensure that no one waits longer than 24 hours to receive emergency dental care for swelling, infection and bleeding, or serious and persistent pain.

3. The Commonwealth conducts a full national review of the current oral health workforce. In an announcement to the Alliance, The Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon. Mr Tony Abbott, undertook to commence this review.

The Alliance indicated that to implement these recommendations there would need to be coordinated action involving:

- \$800 million per annum expended over five years to provide the basic course of dental treatment. Such expenditure would enable those on waiting lists to receive a comprehensive oral health examination each two years or a basic course of treatment in that time.⁶
- An additional expenditure of \$295 million by States and Territories over five years to bring capital State spending up to the Commonwealth's per capita contribution.
- A comprehensive review of the dental workforce. Without this there would be no ability to deliver the programs outlined. Currently, a number of new dental schools are being created primarily with a view to training more dentists to work in rural and remote regions. Concern was expressed that this potential action needed to be better coordinated as there is currently inadequate academic staff available to service all dental schools. The creation of new schools will only exacerbate the shortage to the detriment of existing schools. If additional schools are to be created, then immediate steps are required to increase the numbers of academic staff by making pursuit of such a career more appealing.

"A clear message was delivered to Federal politicians that urgent action is needed ..."

References

1. Slade GD, Spencer AJ, Roberts-Thomson KF. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007).
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Slade GD, Spencer AJ, Roberts-Thomson KF (2007) *Australia's dental generations – The National Survey of Adult Oral Health 2004-06*.
3. Australian Dental Association (2005) *Access to rural oral health care*, October.
4. To view the Plan visit www.ada.org.au
5. The Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, The Honorable Mr Tony Abbott. Address to the National Oral Health Alliance, 20 March 2007.
6. Australian Council of Social Service (2006) *Fair Dental Care for Low Income Earners*. National report on the state of dental care, October.