

FEDERAL BUDGET — DENTAL DELIVERY IMPROVED?

The much awaited assistance for the delivery of dental care to Australians — which featured prominently in the lead up to 2007 Federal Budget — has finally arrived.

Whilst, the Australian Dental Association (ADA) is pleased with some issues being addressed in the Budget, including the treatment for chronically ill patients, training and education, the Government's announcements will do little to alleviate Australia's dental health care crisis.

The measures simply do not go far enough to assist Australia's disadvantaged citizens. Almost 650,000 Australians are on public dental waiting lists and it is most disappointing that the Budget does not really tackle this problem.

In its Pre-Budget submission to the Federal Government, the ADA sought considerable funding to address the poor state of delivery of dental care to the community. This can be viewed on the ADA website or at:

[www.ada.org.au/newsroom/article,
documentid,52933.aspx](http://www.ada.org.au/newsroom/article_documentid,52933.aspx)

What has actually been delivered in the Budget is somewhat lacking, however there were some steps in the right direction.

The benefits for dentistry and dental care provided in the Budget included:

- \$377.6 million to be spent over four years to enable chronically ill dental patients to access dental services in the private sector when they need treatment or need preventative care. Eligible patients will be able to claim Medicare benefits for a diagnostic dental consultation, as well as Medicare benefits for a range of dental treatment services up to a maximum of \$2,000 (including extended Medicare Safety Net benefits) each calendar year¹. The impact this adjustment will have on the Safety Net provisions is unclear at this time.
- \$65.1 million will be invested for a new School of Dentistry and Oral Health to be established at Charles Sturt University. This attempt to reduce the shortages of dentists in rural and remote regions is welcomed although the new School will have difficulties finding academic staff.
- Dental training – expanded rural placements: more dentists will be encouraged to work in regional Australia

through the creation of rural dental schools to provide city-based dentistry students with experience in country towns as part of their training.

- An expansion of the Puggy Hunter Memorial Scholarship Scheme to dentistry to encourage Indigenous people to study dental health.

Sadly, nothing has been done to remedy the shortfall in the numbers of dentists in the public sector. Financial incentives for graduates willing to work in the public sector had been proposed by the ADA.

Improvement of the Enhanced Primary Care (EPC) scheme by the Budget proposals will assist some economically disadvantaged Australians with chronic and complex illnesses where dental treatment will alleviate the illness. There is no means test associated with

eligibility for receipt of such services. The

increase in the extent of services available

should increase the ability of the scheme

to effectively serve patients. However,

this will only have a minimal effect on the

waiting lists that exist in the public sector.

Some of the 650,000 Australians on those

waiting lists have been on those lists for years. In addition, a change to the Medicare scheme to include provision of prosthetic appliances is necessary if the EPC scheme is to be effective.

Given that 90% of dental disease is preventable, the ADA is disappointed that no provision was made in the Budget for an oral health education program. The ADA sought \$4 million for this initiative. \$11 million has been allocated for skin cancer awareness and an investment of a fraction of that sum in oral health promotion could have a positive impact on dental health.

Perhaps more important than the dollars allocated, the Budget marks a recognition and willingness on the part of the Federal Government to assume a greater role in dental care delivery to Australians. The ADA has been strongly lobbying Government to achieve this change and the Budget is a step in the right direction. With an election looming, the ADA will be seeking further commitment and working with Government to ensure that dental health issues are suitably addressed.

¹ www.health.gov.au/budget2007 "Improving Medicare and Hearing Services", 8 May 2007.