

ELECTION EDITION

With the Federal election announced for 24 November 2007, in this edition of the *National Dental Update* the Australian Dental Association Inc. (ADA) identifies the key areas of concern that have to be addressed relating to national dental health and dental care delivery within Australia.

Maldistribution in the supply of dentists

A dentist shortage exists in rural and remote areas and in the public sector which is negatively impacting on the delivery of services in areas of need. We have less than half the dentist:patient ratio of some European countries and this is worse in rural areas and the public sector.

The ADA calls on the Commonwealth Government to:

- Fund a clinical placement year for graduating dentists (University and overseas trained dentists). This placement year, to be served in the public dental sector or through private rural placements, would increase access to dental care for public sector and rural patients and significantly reduce waiting lists.

- Create further scholarships for dental students from rural and remote parts of Australia to encourage graduates to practice in these areas.

- Extend the general practitioner and medical specialist relocation programs to dentists.

- Provide financial incentives to dental graduates who in turn agree to provide their services in regional, rural and remote areas or in the public sector.

Self-sufficiency should be obtained in creating new dentists by greater investment in the education of Australian students. This should be achieved by increasing investment in dental places in Australian University dental schools and by the creation of additional academic staff places. No new dental schools should be created without a comprehensive workforce review and additional funding should be directed to improving the facilities and infrastructure of existing schools.

Increased access to dental care for the financially disadvantaged

There are said to be approximately 650,000 people on waiting lists for public dental care with an average waiting time of 27 months.

The ADA calls on Governments to urgently act on the

National Oral Health Plan (2004) they have endorsed. Targeted funding and cohesive programs for the delivery of dental care should focus initially upon socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

The ADA is critical of the Commonwealth Government's failure to so target its program of new Medicare rebates for dental services for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs. This funding should have been targeted to the financially disadvantaged and should not have been universally available under Medicare to the wealthy and poor alike. The expected contribution of \$384.6 million over four years is welcomed and demonstrates a commitment by the Government, but it is badly misdirected.

Labor's dental plan is said to invest \$290 million over three years in a Commonwealth Dental Health Program. It is said funding will be available for the States and Territories to either supplement their existing public services or purchase private sector appointments to allow access for many to a basic course of care. The

State and Territory Governments – in exchange for additional funding – will be required to meet new standards of dental care, including providing priority services to individuals with chronic diseases affected by poor oral health.

This is a good approach but lack of detail makes it impossible for the ADA to comment. The ADA agrees that Federal funding be conditional on States and Territories being accountable for their services.

Both plans have some good points and bad. Combining elements of both would be the way to tackle the problem. "The ALP Plan will provide less dentistry to more people while the Liberal Plan will provide more dentistry to less people. These initiatives must be only a first step," said Dr John Matthews, President of the ADA.

Improvement of Indigenous oral health

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience significantly poorer oral health than the general population.

The ADA calls for a greater focus on the oral health of Australia's Indigenous population, including funding for oral health training for Aboriginal health workers, vocational training assistance for Aboriginal dentists, and fluoridation facilities.

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Improved dental care for older people

Older people, particularly those with cognitive impairment, are at risk of developing oral disease. For these people, access to dental care is difficult, particularly if living in residential accommodation or if experiencing limited mobility.

The Commonwealth Government must provide leadership to implement the initiatives outlined in the National Oral Health Plan such as:

- improved oral health assessments through the Home and Community Care programs and the Aged Care Assessment Services;
- improved oral hygiene programs to assist older people to live independently in the community;
- ensuring that oral health is taken into account when developing a care plan for people in residential accommodation;
- more affordable transport to enable older people to attend dental appointments; and
- greater funding for public dental care.

Dental education

The ADA calls for greater consistency in the education of dentists and other oral health professionals. Greater authority has to be provided to the Australian Dental Council to create uniformity in dental education standards and the qualifications granted to graduates of courses. The ADA has seen inconsistency in this area resulting in some graduates receiving degrees with highly inflated titles as compared to those obtained by highly qualified practitioners. To provide masters or equivalent qualifications to students who undergo only limited studies creates confusion in the minds of the public and may only serve to inflate the cost of services provided by such practitioners. "We should not succumb to marketing ploys that introduce 'Mickey Mouse' degrees to fund full fee paying courses," Dr Matthews said.

Improved dental care for children

Whilst many Australian children enjoy relatively good oral health, gains made in childhood oral health are diminishing.

The ADA calls for the provision of funding so that all children can access and receive an oral health examination and treatment. Increased access to school dental services and increased promotion of oral health to children and adolescents is required.

Oral health promotion

Over the past two decades, Governments throughout Australia have achieved success in delivering health promotion messages. It is time that Governments now turn their attention toward promoting oral health.

The ADA has always believed that the most effective way to improve dental health and reduce long term health costs would be to invest in oral health promotion programs which would focus on risk factors that contribute to poor oral health. Governments should join the ADA in oral health promotion activities.

Fluoridation of public water supplies

The *National Adult Oral Health Survey* found that fluoridation of public water supplies has proven to be a safe, effective and equitable public health measure for reducing the prevalence of dental decay in all age groups. Despite this, many community water supplies are still not fluoridated.

To maximize its effects and benefits to general health, all levels of Government should adopt water fluoridation as part of health policy and actively support its introduction, where feasible, as a public health measure.

More dental research

Dental research enjoys very little financial support. It does not seem to possess the same degree of appeal as can be found with cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, asthma and many other areas of medical and pharmacological research.

Given the relationship between oral health and general health, more research should be undertaken into ways of reducing the incidence of oral diseases. Oral diseases and disorders are a major public health problem in Australia with a very high economic burden.

Report card on dental health policies

The ADA sent the major political parties a request for details of their position on a series of dental issues. For their replies visit www.ada.org.au and click on the Parliament House logo. For a more detailed commentary of what the ADA considers necessary to improve dental health delivery, please review its Pre-Budget Submission 2007-2008 at:

www.ada.org.au/newsroom/articles,category,submissions.aspx

For more information contact ADA Inc on 02 9906 4412.