Dentists testify about dangers of dental workforce oversupply and reduced focus on oral health promotion

Australia’s oral health services are at risk if the Australian Government loses its focus on oral health promotion and if action is not taken to address the oversupply of the dental workforce. This was the Australian Dental Association (ADA)’s main message to the Senate Committee Community Affairs Inquiry (Inquiry) into the abolition of Health Workforce Australia (HWA) and the Australian National Preventive Health Agency (ANPHA).

Vice-President of the ADA, Dr Carmelo Bonanno, who gave evidence to the Inquiry, said:

“Any change in bureaucratic arrangements must ensure that the good work done by these agencies is not lost. HWA’s comprehensive in-depth review of the oral health workforce – ‘Health Workforce 2025 – Oral Health’, is already complete, yet has not been published. Its findings confirm what we already know – that there is an oversupply of the dental workforce that will continue until 2025.”

“All policy settings, when it comes to workforce education, training and migration, must reflect the actual situation on the ground in the healthcare workforce so health practitioners can most effectively address chronic disease.”

The rates at which local dentist graduates obtain full time work has dropped considerably from 95% in 2011 to less than 84% in 2013 according to the Graduate Careers Survey. In spite of this the Australian Government’s impending 2014 Skilled Occupation List (List) has not taken into account the workforce data gathered by HWA. This means that people with overseas dental qualifications continue to crowd out the available locally trained dental workforce.

The ADA also gave evidence about the unmanageable levels of chronic disease as outlined in the AIHW’s report, ‘Australia’s Health 2014’. Oral disease is now rated as one of the four most expensive chronic disease groups to treat.

Dr Bonanno concluded: “The Australian Government must ensure that the work and investment already made by ANPHA in health promotion initiatives are not wasted. It now has a chance to broaden the scope of current health prevention and promotion activities: oral health messages can be linked into the initiatives that target obesity, tobacco and alcohol abuse, as they are all causative factors in caries, gum disease and oral cancers”.

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