

Denticare

A universal primary dental care system



THE
GREENS



Good dental health is essential for general health and well being and dental services should be a key component of a wellness-oriented health system. It is firmly established that poor dental health leads to poor general health including increased cardiovascular disease and stroke. Yet many Australians, particularly those on lower incomes, are not able to access basic dental care. There are more than 500,000 people on dental waiting lists with a national average wait for basic dental care taking 27 months.

The Menzies Centre for Health Policy estimate that between seven and 10 per cent of GP visits are for dental problems costing Medicare around \$350million per year. GPs provide prescriptions for painkillers and antibiotics, with a cost to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme of several million dollars a year. Repeated antibiotic prescription without treatment of the underlying dental disease contributes to the emergence of antibiotic resistant bacteria. The Menzies Centre for Health Policy further estimates that oral disease results in around one million lost work days per year and costs the economy approximately \$2 billion in direct costs and lost productivity.¹

Major changes in the dental health system in Australia are urgently needed. The Greens propose that non-cosmetic dental services are incorporated into Medicare under a universal dental health scheme, Denticare.

Denticare will:

- provide universal comprehensive basic primary (non-cosmetic) dental care for all Australians through the expansion of the currently established dental Medicare provisions for the chronic illness dental scheme established by the Howard government;
- cost a total of \$4.3 billion p.a. for basic dental care for the total population.²

1 Dental and Oral Health Policy Paper by Professor Stephen Leeder and Dr Lesley Russell, Menzies Centre for Health Policy, September 2007)

2 ibid

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- be implemented over a period of five years³ to cover the entire population – this will avoid initial cost-overload due to high levels of unmet dental need and ensure that the dental workforce is developed in line with the scheme;
- provide access to dental care for low income earners, particularly those on dental waiting lists, in the first phase of the scheme;
- establish clear clinical guidelines of best practice for dental diagnosis and treatment planning to ensure that all public funds committed to Medicare are justified on strict clinical grounds;
- be consistent with the dental care items currently covered by the Department of Veterans Affairs;
- direct more funding for oral health promotion education programs;
- overcome the existing problem for public dental services of trying to treat almost half the population with less than 10% of the dentists.

The Enhanced Primary Care Dental Program (dental care for people with chronic illness) provides a precedent and informative trial for universal dental care. The scheme was introduced by the Howard Government in November 2007. It provides Medicare dental items to the value of \$4,250 over 2 years for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs if referred by a GP. Since its inception 429,000 Australians have received comprehensive dental service.

³ Association for the Promotion of Oral Health 'Briefing note on dental Medicare' (2009) pp.2