

# THE GREENS' NATIONAL HEALTHCARE PLAN:

EARLY INTERVENTION, PREVENTION AND KEEPING PEOPLE WELL



## EARLY INTERVENTION – KEEPING PEOPLE OUT OF HOSPITAL

*The real challenge for health systems today is managing illness in a way that keeps people out of hospitals. The Greens believe this is best achieved through better funded primary health care services, such as dental care and mental health services. Better primary health care, that is general practice doctors, community-based health services and screening programs, can, if properly targeted and resourced, achieve better health outcomes at a lower cost than high cost hospitals and specialists.*

Health costs are rising by 9-10% per annum<sup>1</sup>, the population is living longer and the growing impact of chronic disease is placing a burden on our health system which has become unsustainable. According to the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, 'Patient access block and the emergency department overcrowding it causes, constitutes the greatest threat to quality emergency care, being associated with adverse events, errors, delayed time-critical care, increased morbidity and excess deaths<sup>2</sup>. In large emergency departments, 40% or more of staff time is spent caring for patients who are waiting for a bed, rather than looking after new emergency patients<sup>3</sup>.'

Our hospital system is clearly overburdened and in crisis. The evidence that health policies should focus on keeping people well, preventing illness or better managing their illness in the community is overwhelming. The Greens National Healthcare Plan is focused on early intervention, prevention and keeping people well.

The Greens have developed policies specifically for dental and mental health because these are two areas that have significant underinvestment, poor access for those most in need and escalating cost implications if not treated early.

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. Over 500,000 Australians now miss out on basic dental care.

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1 Budget paper no. 1 <http://www.budget.gov.au/2010-11/content/bp1/html/index.htm>

2 Richardson DB, Mountain D. Myths versus facts in emergency department overcrowding and hospital access block. *Med J Aust* 2009; 190 (7): 369-374

3 Richardson D. 2008–2 access block point prevalence survey. Carried out by the Road Trauma and Emergency Medicine Unit, Australian National University on behalf of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine. September 2008. [http://www.acem.org.au/media/media\\_releases/September\\_2008\\_Snapshot\\_Report.pdf](http://www.acem.org.au/media/media_releases/September_2008_Snapshot_Report.pdf)

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One in five Australians experiences a mental illness every year. Years of under funding by successive federal governments have resulted in a mental health system which is not delivering adequate services. The current model of mental health care doesn't work - it is hospital-centric and drastically under-funded.

The Greens will tackle the problem of poor dental and mental health by:

- ***Introducing Denticare - a universal dental care scheme***

Denticare will provide 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.

- ***Supporting the rural and regional dental workforce***

Increasing the rural dental workforce and rural services, by providing incentive payments for dental professionals to work with GPs in rural areas under the Denticare scheme and introduce a HECS rebate for new graduates for every 12 months of work completed in rural and remote dental practice.

- ***Supporting dental pro bono programs for low income Australians***

The Greens recognise the valuable role played by many dental professionals who voluntarily provide their services, practices and materials to help some of the many low income Australians who are missing out on dental care. We believe that these pro bono programs, and others like them, should be supported to maximise their positive impact with increased funding for more effective co-ordination, communications and administration.

- ***Establish a new Minister for Mental Health***

Years of under-funding and neglect have left our mental health services in crisis and a mental health system that is failing Australians. The system requires a substantial injection of funds, and a re-think of the way our mental health services operate and interact. The Greens believe mental health is a critical area of health and deserves a dedicated minister to take responsibility for management of this task.

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- ***Providing additional funding of at least \$350 million per year for mental health***

This level of funding over the next four years should be directed to early intervention mental health programs including Headspace and early psychosis prevention services; and multi-disciplinary community-based sub-acute services that supports 'stepped' (two-staged) prevention and recovery care.

- ***Increasing access to mental health services in rural and regional areas***

Develop a rural and regional mental health workforce for effective outreach capacity in rural towns and remote communities. Invest an additional \$58.5m over 4 years for incentives at the primary care level.

And

- ***A Hearing Health Plan – better early intervention and support for people with hearing loss***

Increase access to hearing services through means-tested eligibility for 21 to 65 year olds and fee for service options. Better screening programs for all Australians, including school entry and enhanced programs and assistance for Indigenous communities.

## PREVENTION – KEEPING PEOPLE WELL

The Greens' vision for health reform transforms the costly hospital-based 'sickness' system to a 'wellness' system that promotes and supports good health and early intervention approaches. The Greens believe that spiralling health costs could be contained and reduced by this approach. We have a number of policies which will help keep our society healthy.

The Greens will tackle our biggest public health challenges by:

- ***Introducing a levy on junk food and alcohol advertising***

Advertisers of junk food and alcohol will have the option of including approved health information on all advertising or paying a 1.5% levy. This initiative, which has been adopted in France since 2004, would discourage the advertising of junk food and alcohol, and encourage the promotion of healthier alternatives, priorities identified by the

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4 National Preventative Health Taskforce. Australia: the healthiest country by 2020. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2008. [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/preventativehealth/publishing.nsf/Content/A06C2FCF439ECDA1CA2574DD0081E40C/\\$File/discussion-28oct.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/preventativehealth/publishing.nsf/Content/A06C2FCF439ECDA1CA2574DD0081E40C/$File/discussion-28oct.pdf) (accessed Jul 2009)

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National Preventative Health Taskforce<sup>4</sup>. The revenue raised through this levy would be directed to a Health Promotion Fund overseen by the National Preventive Health Agency.

- ***Extending the time designated as children's television viewing to limit junk food advertising to children.***

The Greens' legislation will limit the amount of junk food advertising to children by extending the children's television viewing hours to 6am to 9.30pm. While an advertising limitation alone will not eliminate obesity, it is widely acknowledged as an important step to address this growing problem.

- ***Introduce a simple health information labelling system for food and beverages***

Traffic Light food labelling will include symbols and coloured schema to provide at-a-glance interpretation of health information and enable people to make decisions on the basis of a clear, easily understood guide to the health benefits or otherwise of the food they are eating. The traffic lights will indicate levels of fats, sugars and salts in food and beverages.

- ***Support the establishment of an independent National Preventive Health Agency***

It is critical that an independent agency has responsibility for preventive health and that the agency is adequately funded to properly fulfil its role. The Greens believe the agency should have its current budget doubled to \$200m as well as the \$50m from the alcopops revenue for the Greens' alcohol harm prevention package.

- ***Introduce a floor price on cigarettes***

There has been a significant reduction (30%) in the number of smokers in Australia over the past 35 years. Yet smoking still costs the community \$5.7bn in lost work days and damages the health of around 2.9 million Australians every year. The Greens strongly support the government's recent increase in tobacco tax as a mechanism to reduce smoking. In addition, the Greens will introduce a minimum floor price on cigarettes to prevent tobacco companies and retailers from flooding the Australian market with cheap imported cigarettes.

- ***Creating a safer drinking culture***

The Greens' vision is to promote a safer drinking culture for people who drink and those around them. We believe this is best achieved by a nationally consistent approach to liquor control laws, increasing investment in social marketing and reviewing and reforming the taxation of alcohol.