



# BRUSHING UP OUR DENTAL CARE

## Growing dental care in Medicare

### Ensuring dental care for you and your family

Millions of Australians put off essential dental care because they can't afford it, leading to serious health problems. The Greens believe your income should not determine your health. We have an affordable plan to give more Australians access to the dental care they need, when they need it.

The Greens believe that dental care should be an integral part of our health care system. The exclusion of dental care from Australia's public health system causes hardship and poor health outcomes for millions of Australians. The Greens' affordable plan will provide access to essential dental care for millions more Australians.

#### > INTRODUCING DENTICARE

The Greens will retain the Child Dental Benefits Scheme (CDBS) that the Government has proposed to axe and which provides essential dental care through Medicare to children in families receiving Family Tax Benefit A. And starting in July 2017, we'll extend this to provide dental care for those who need it most by **investing \$6.6 billion<sup>1</sup> over the forward estimates** to provide \$1000 for essential dental care every two years to more Australians. We'll introduce the new benefits through a staged commencement:

| Year | People eligible for Denticare   |
|------|---|
| 2016 | Children in Family Tax Benefit A families                                   |
| 2017 | Add aged pension recipients and full benefit income support recipients      |
| 2018 | Add Commonwealth Seniors Card Holders and all other Concession Card holders |

#### > PUBLICLY FUNDING DENTAL CARE

If you break a toe, your doctor and local hospital can provide the treatment you need, free of charge. But with dental care excluded from Medicare – what do you do if you break a tooth?

This exclusion sees millions of Australians putting off visits to the dentist, leading to painful and sometimes life-threatening complications.

The Greens have long called for this situation to be changed. We worked with the last government and achieved Medicare funding for dental services for millions of Australian children with the Child Dental Benefits Scheme (CDBS).

<sup>1</sup> Based on costings from the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO)

The creation of the CDBS allowed families in receipt of Family Tax Benefit A to claim up to \$1000 allowance every two years for basic dental services for each child under 18. This includes check-ups and exams, x-rays, and cleaning, as well as more complex procedures such as fillings, root canals and extractions.

The scheme allows people to visit their local dentist, who can access the payments from Medicare for eligible patients. The government wants to cut this scheme and instead encourage people to visit state public dental hospitals – which already have packed waiting lists and see patients having to travel long distances to attend, particularly those in regional and rural communities.

#### > WEALTH AND POSTCODE SHOULDN'T DETERMINE HEALTH

Cost is a huge barrier to accessing a dentist in Australia. The lower your income, the more likely you are to experience chronic dental problems; low income earners have more than twice the rate of untreated dental decay as high income earners. For people in rural and regional Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and the aged, the numbers are even worse.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike other areas of the health system, most dental health expenditure comes from our own pockets. For some, the cost of a trip to the dentist can be a high barrier. As a result, over a third of adults report that they have delayed seeing a dentist due to cost.<sup>3</sup> More than three quarters of a million GP visits a year are due to dental health issues<sup>4</sup>, and in one year alone,

<sup>2</sup> Report of the National Advisory Council on Dental Health 2012 <<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/final-report-of-national-advisory-council-on-dental-health.htm>>

<sup>3</sup> Oral health and dental care in Australia: key facts and figures 2015, AIHW.

<sup>4</sup> Report of the National Advisory Council on Dental Health 2012 <<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/final-report-of-national-advisory-council-on-dental-health.htm>>

---

there were 128,712 hospitalisations due to dental issues that were serious enough to require a general anaesthetic.<sup>5</sup>

The Greens will provide access to dental care to approximately an additional 4 million Australians who can least afford it, because your wealth should not determine your oral health.

## > A HEALTH CRISIS IN THE MAKING

Untreated dental disease can have a huge impact on a person's quality of life. If you have ever been unlucky enough to wake up with a toothache, it's easy to understand how the inability to access proper treatment due to its cost, could make life a misery.

Untreated dental disease can have very serious consequences, such as leading to low birth weight and premature babies<sup>6</sup>, increased risk of heart disease<sup>7</sup> and life-threatening infections. Poor dental health can also lead to social isolation, poor diet, and depression, not to mention financial consequences.<sup>8</sup>

For those who can't afford to see a private dentist, the state governments provide care through public dental hospitals. They struggle to meet demand, and many parts of regional and remote Australia have no access to these public dental hospitals. There are hundreds of thousands of people stuck on state waiting lists, with wait times reaching up to years depending on the treatment required. Since 80% of the dental workforce works in the private sector, its clear public dental hospitals are only part of the solution.

## > A GENUINE COMMITMENT TO DENTAL CARE

The government's recently announced Child and Adult Public Dental Scheme is a shocker. They will cut the Child Dental Benefits Scheme (CDBS) to pay for a program which takes all dental out of Medicare and will deny access by eligible patients to 80% of Australia's dentists, who work in the private sector. Adding to the waiting lists at public dental hospitals is not the answer.

The government's policy will hurt Australians, particularly in regional Australia who do not have ready access to state run public dental hospitals. These patients will be forced to travel for miles and join long waiting lists to see a dentist for a check-up.

Only the Greens have a costed, affordable Denticare policy to give more Australians access to their local dentist for the essential treatment they need.

## > PROMOTING UPTAKE

The government has suggested that the CDBS has been under used by those who are eligible for the scheme. We would draw from any unspent funds to develop an education and promotion campaign to ensure dentists and eligible people are aware of, and utilise the scheme.

---

<sup>5</sup> Oral health and dental care in Australia: key facts and figures 2015, AIHW.

<sup>6</sup> Silk H, Douglass AB, Douglass JM & Silk L 2008. Oral health during pregnancy. *American Family Physician* 77:1139–44.

<sup>7</sup> Bristol University, Bleeding gums increase risk of heart disease, 2008. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2008/5880.html>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Health, Final Report of National Advisory Council on Dental Health, 2012.