

PHAA's Oral Health 'REPAIR' Reform Proposal

Australians are experiencing a long and painful wait for government action on oral health and oral health services. The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) urges all parties to move Australia towards a system of universal access to dental services and oral health. Achieving this will take time, workforce planning and policy development. It will also take a significant financial investment. However the costs of not proceeding will be far greater in terms of poor oral health outcomes and missed opportunities to prevent dental disease.

As a practical start, the PHAA proposes a 'REPAIR' scheme to provide a pathway for Government to improve oral health in Australia. It is a model of investment in future oral health emphasising prevention while responding significantly to immediate problems. REPAIR provides the building blocks for meeting the needs of over 50% of Australians who currently go without regular dental care due to cost, unavailability of services and other barriers.

REPAIR

1. **RE-vitalise** oral health care through national leadership, with the Commonwealth acting collaboratively with the states and territories. The Commonwealth should appoint an **Advisory Panel** on Oral Health and a **Chief Dental Officer**, responsible for advising the Minister on dentistry, including the evidence base for policy development and reform. (\$3m pa)
2. **Prevent** dental diseases through the implementation of population oral health promotion activities as proposed by the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC), linked to the **National Preventive Health Strategy**. Primarily target groups at high risk of oral and dental diseases. Help combat common dental diseases that cause extensive tissue infection and result in an estimated 32,000 preventable hospitalisations per year. (\$20m pa)
3. **Access** improved to dental services and oral health in Australia. While no single model currently has unanimous support, there is widespread acknowledgement that **regular timely access to prevention–focussed services must become uniformly available to all Australians** and that we need national leadership in this regard. There are a number of options for immediate reform of existing policies to improve access to timely services, namely:
 - a. Reforms to the Medicare Chronic Disease Dental Scheme ranging from better regulation of the program to alleviate the apparent over-servicing or unnecessarily performed services which result in unnecessary costs to the system; tightening its eligibility and reducing the scope of its services; or by establishing a pre-approval process for some services (similar to that established in the Department of Veteran's Affairs). (saving \$250m pa)

- b. Winding up the Medicare Chronic Disease Dental Scheme so as to make savings that can be applied elsewhere for the improvement of dental services and oral health.
- c. Re-introducing the Commonwealth Dental Health Program. (\$450m pa)
- d. Commonwealth agreement with the states and territories to expand universal care for children and young adults with funding that follows the client. These funds are for the treatment of young people's dental problems, moving beyond the current Teen Dental Plan which allows only consultations without service. (\$400m pa absorbing Teen Dental Program)

4. **Improve** the workforce.

- a. Phase in a **dental residency** (foundation) year over 5-10 years as policy, infrastructure and professional mentoring and support develop - creating a new and innovative community dental program focused on those Australians most in need and unsuited to private practice care . (initially \$20m pa for operations and \$60m pa for infrastructure)
- b. Introduce **regional, rural and remote incentives** to correct the maldistribution of the workforce. (initially \$10m pa)

5. **Research**, monitoring and evaluation. Fairer dental services and improved oral health require well informed actions, ongoing monitoring and continuing quality improvement based on timely, quality information. (\$5m pa)