



Public Health Association
AUSTRALIA

23 September 2009

The Hon Nicola Roxon MP
Minister for Health and Ageing
Parliament House
Canberra 2600

Regarding Oral Health and 'Denticare'

Dear Minister,

I am writing on behalf of the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) as part of your consultation process on the report of the National Health and Hospital Reform Commission's (NHHRC) to urge you to take action on oral health. We are calling on the Australian Government to commit to the introduction of the 'Denticare' program, as recommended by the NHHRC. The PHAA believes that 'Denticare' should be seen as an integral part of primary health care and supports the NHHRC's claim that the major inequities in Australians' oral health need to be addressed, especially with mounting evidence of links between oral and overall health .

Our view is that 'Denticare' should be introduced in a deliberate, planned way to ensure appropriate support for all Australians and particularly for those who are disadvantaged. The Commission's oral health proposals do have the potential to improve Australians' oral health and access to dental care. However, the PHAA believes it should be achieved through an appropriately funded, detailed and accountable implementation process that provides a roadmap to reducing inequities.

The high cost of private dental care presents a significant access barrier as do the waiting times for grossly under-resourced public dental services. Seventy-eight percent of medical services in Australia are government funded but only 18% of dental services receive government funding. Basic dental care should be an integral part of primary health care. It is important that the opportunity to improve Australians' oral health and to redress significant inequalities is not lost.

Our Association hopes that you will adopt a deliberate and phased implementation of 'Denticare' that will allow for the development of policies that take into account not only cost but other critical barriers to dental care. This is particularly important with regard to rural and remote areas as well as for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The PHAA is working closely with Australian Healthcare & Hospitals Association (AHHA) and National Rural Health Alliance to encourage your Government to use the proposed the Commonwealth Dental Health Program combined with a refined Medicare Chronic Disease Dental Program as a first step

towards the comprehensive vision for oral health in Australia that incorporates the NHHRC recommendations.

Members of our Oral Health Special Interest Group noted that the previous Government in its last budget provided \$384.6 million funding over four years for an expanded Medicare Chronic Disease Dental Program. In fact, the cost of the program without better management will be around \$1.8 billion over four years. This compares with the \$290 million over three years that the incoming Rudd government budgeted for the critically needed Commonwealth Dental Health Program (CDHP) to improve state and territory public dental services for disadvantaged adults across Australia.

When the CDHP Bill failed to gain Coalition and minor party support in the Senate as it simultaneously cut the Medicare Dental Scheme it resulted in nothing happening. Consequently, State and Territory Dental Services have not received the additional \$97 million they were expecting last year. The result is no boost to public dental services for the 650,000 disadvantaged Australians who have been waiting years for basic dental care.

The PHAA is urging the Australian Government to proceed with the Commonwealth Dental Health Program and a reduced Medicare Chronic Disease Program while a detailed implementation plan is being developed.

We believe that a carefully developed implementation plan will facilitate your vision for equitable access to dental care to become a reality. However, we are concerned that such planning might be used as an excuse for bureaucratic delay and we ask you to progress these issues as a matter of urgency.

We understand that both the Australian Healthcare & Hospitals Association and the National Rural Health Alliance have offered to work with you on these matters and we would also be happy to be involved in efforts to improve access to better oral health for more Australians.

Yours sincerely



Michael Moore
CEO
Public Health Association of Australia