Time to connect the mouth to the body under Medicare

As the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meets today, Australia’s pre-eminent public health organisation calls on state and federal governments to develop a more positive national vision for universal access to dental care.

“All Australians should be able to visit a dental professional when they need to,” said Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) CEO, Terry Slevin.

“An accessible system that normalises prevention and integrates oral health within primary health care is long overdue. A phased-in and targeted universal program will save money and pain in the long run.”

The convenor of PHAA’s Oral Health Special Interest Group, oral health therapist Tan Nguyen, said that poorer Australians are less likely to see a dental professional for regular preventative care and more likely to attend for dental emergencies only.

“With rising social inequalities across Australia, we need a dental plan that makes oral check-ups and basic dental care affordable and routine,” Mr Nguyen said.

“Successive governments have yet to complete the implementation of the National Oral Health Promotion Plan. It was developed while Labor was in office, but then the current national government chose new directions. Both parties have made a start, but a strong bipartisan result still eludes us.”

“The National Oral Health Plan 2015-2024 endorsed by COAG is packed with excellent strategies, but there has been no leadership or additional funding for system-wide reform,” Mr Nguyen said.

One of the Plan’s recommendations is that everyone should have an oral health check-up and preventive focused care every two years.

The Grattan Institute has described the current system as “a mess”, with a complex mix of federal and state government funding and responsibility, making it difficult for patients to navigate.

Low-income families, Indigenous Australians, people with additional health needs and many older adults suffer most. Every year, about two million Australian adults don’t get dental care when they need it most because of the cost.

“As the PHAA has met new members of federal parliament in recent weeks, dental care has consistently come up as a concern. The newly returned government has an opportunity to listen to colleagues across the political divide, and develop and implement an overdue national dental scheme,” urged Mr Slevin.

Mr Nguyen also observed a lack of awareness of broad systemic issues.

“Low-income people are often blamed for their oral hygiene and excess sugar intake without understanding the implications of low income and social determinants. We need to be thinking about how
the broader health workforce other than dentists can contribute towards universal access to dental care,” he said.

More details on the PHAA’s Oral Health Policy is here.

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