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Let’s bite the bullet on oral and dental health

With national leadership and affordable new expenditure, Australia could fix the terrible state of oral and dental health among its adults. The Alliance is a strong supporter of the campaign promoted by ACOSS and the Australian Dental Association because people in rural and remote areas are among the worst-served and worst-affected with regard to oral and dental health. The NRHA’s number one priority presented to Minister Abbott last week was to improve access to dentists for rural people.

“We support the plan launched this week by ACOSS which would see the Australian Government covering the minimum costs of basic dental care for adults who cannot afford private fees,” Chair of the Alliance, John Wakerman, said. (ACOSS has estimated the cost to the Government at around $160 million in the first year, rising to $800 million in today’s prices in year 5 once the States’ capacity to deliver has been built up.)

“Thanks to the Government’s leadership, substantial amounts have been committed to mental health and the drought – and for very good reason. In addition, we now ask for something that ‘enables people to eat, speak and socialise without pain, discomfort or embarrassment’,” Dr Wakerman said. “But despite Health Ministers having agreed on the national oral health plan over two years ago, little progress has been made. Timely dental care is relatively cheap and without it people suffer unnecessarily,” he said.

The Commonwealth’s funds would be used by the States to buy in the services of private practitioners and to build the capacity of the States’ public dental services system, with service in both cases being targeted for people on low income and with particularly poor access. Continued provision of Commonwealth funding would be contingent on States making satisfactory progress in building these services and meeting minimum standards in children’s dental services, preventive checks and emergency dental services. (The Alliance would like to see the spread of fluoridation added to this list of minimum standards.)

The Alliance has a particular interest in the oral and dental labour force – a key determinant of the national capacity to deliver more dental services that underlies the ACOSS proposal. “Wherever there are shortages of health professionals they are most severe in rural and remote areas. There are far too few dentists and oral hygienists in rural areas and we hear horror stories, like young people having to have all their teeth out because of dental pain and the complete absence of preventive care,” he said.

“Our number one request of Tony Abbott last week at our Council meeting was for more places in dental schools for people from rural areas, a scholarship scheme to help cover their high costs of study, and relocation and retention incentives for rural dentists.”

The ACOSS paper is available on the website at www.acoss.org.au

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