



NATIONAL RURAL
HEALTH
ALLIANCE INC.

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Dental health programs: equity hinges on introduction of the CDHP

New evidence shows just how inequitable the Medicare funded dental health program is – and the critical need for the Government to introduce its planned Commonwealth Dental Health Program (CDHP).

The existing Enhanced Primary Care (EPC) program which provides dental care under Medicare is a move in the right direction towards universally accessible dental care but it is heading towards a massive cost blow-out and failing to provide a service to many in need. If the use of the EPC dental scheme reaches the level spent in New South Wales in August 2008, the national cost will be almost \$900 million a year compared with the Coalition Government's budget for it of \$365 million over four years.

There is mounting evidence to show that, on its own, the EPC program is resulting in massive inequities between jurisdictions. For instance the total dollar benefits paid from November 2007 to August 2008 per 100,000 head of population varies from \$1,431,604 in NSW to \$15,363 in the Northern Territory.

Dr Jenny May, Chair of the Alliance, said that with many fewer private dentists in rural and remote areas, a scheme which works exclusively through them is not fair to country people.

“At the very least, there needs to be much tighter control on the EPC scheme in the cities so that the money is not all spent there, and so that what is spent goes to the most needy patients,” said Dr May. “The most needy include those on low incomes, Indigenous Australians and many people of rural and remote areas.”

Tighter control would include means-testing, limits to dental services, scheduled fees, close definition of eligibility and careful monitoring.

Dr May expressed her concern that the proposed CDHP, targeted at people most in need, is unlikely to get funding if the EPC scheme continues in its current form. State and Territory governments are struggling to provide public oral health care services. Funding is grossly inadequate, and strong competition from the private sector and national shortages of dentists, oral health therapists and dental hygienists makes recruitment and retention of staff extremely challenging. State and Territory public oral health services are relying heavily on receiving the additional funding promised by the Commonwealth under the CDHP.

“The Alliance is calling on political parties to work together to retain the best elements of the EPC and to confirm the CDHP funding as a matter of urgency,” Dr May said.

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