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Improved dental care must remain a top priority

A group of eight national health organisations have today reiterated their support for continued investment in improved dental health, particularly for children and those who rely on public dental health services.

Information from this week's Senate Estimates confirmed that both the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) agreed in August 2013 and the Child Dental Benefits Schedule are beginning to have the desired results.

Tony McBride, Chair of AHCRA, said that dental care has been one of the Cinderellas of the public health system until now. "The new programs are widely welcomed as enabling much greater access to children and also to adults, many of whom wait up to three years for basic dental care," he said.

Under the 2012/13-2014/15 NPA, some \$100 million has been allocated to the States and Territories to date, enabling them to reduce waiting times for public dental services. The ongoing success of the program is dependent on continued collaboration and maintenance of effort by State/Territory and Federal Governments.

The Abbott Government is considering its position on the second NPA for public dental services, which is designed to provide significant additional resources to the public dental sector from 1 July this year. "It is essential that this program begins in mid-year as planned. The oral health workforce has expanded and funding is now the issue, not workforce," said Melanie Walker of the PHAA.

Meanwhile the Child Dental Benefits Schedule (CDBS) has kicked off, with the Department of Human Services responsible for promoting the Scheme and for making payments. Information provided to Senate Estimates suggests that to the end of January 2014, over 18,000 children had accessed benefits, with \$3.9 million paid in benefits.

Given the history of poor access in rural and remote areas, the proposal raised in Senate Estimates last week to monitor expenditure under the CDBS by rurality would certainly provide some valuable information .

The eight national health bodies are also expecting that the National Oral Health Promotion Plan - which languished under the previous Government - will proceed and be funded as anticipated. The eight are the Australian Council of Social Service, the Australian Dental Association, the Australian Dental and Oral Health Therapists' Association, the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance, the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association, the Dental Hygienists' Association of Australia, the National Rural Health Alliance and the Public Health Association of Australia.

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