



NATIONAL RURAL
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Dentists: rare as hen's teeth in remote areas

People in rural and remote areas are among those who stand to benefit most from better dental health services – but for this to be realised, proposed improvements will need to give particular attention to the availability of dentists and other oral health professionals in country Australia.

The NRHA - like other partners of the National Oral Health Alliance - has thrown its full weight behind current moves to improve dental health services. But in remote areas dentists are almost as rare as hen's teeth (18 per 100,000 people compared with 60 per 100,000 in major cities). And whereas between 2003 and 2006 there were modest increases in dentist numbers in the major cities, the number in remote and very remote areas fell slightly. In 2006, there were 75 dental professionals (including dentists, specialists, therapists, hygienists, oral health therapists and prosthetists) per 100,000 people in the major cities, and 24 per 100,000 in remote areas.

The Alliance welcomed the Commonwealth announcements in May 2011 of Foundation Year places for dentist graduates and some extra funding for mobile Indigenous dental health projects. But a great deal more needs to be done – both urgently and over the long term.

The Alliance has proposed that dentists, therapists and hygienists should receive a similar range of rural workforce incentives as are available to GPs, including scholarships for rural students, HECS relief for rural practice, and locum relief services. If incentives and training are appropriate, the expanding oral health therapist and dental hygienist workforce will help improve access in the bush.

Last week's Brotherhood of St Laurence "End the Decay" Report proposes 'voluntarism' (private dentists contracting into public dentistry) and cadetships, through which dental students would be offered scholarships in return for service in public dentistry.

The Report estimates the annual cost to the economy of untreated dental conditions at between \$1.3 and \$2 billion, with the brunt being borne by families on low incomes. Indigenous people - 70 per cent of whom live outside the capital cities - are twice as likely as non-Indigenous people to have untreated decay. And more than 50 per cent of all 6 year olds have decayed baby teeth.

In 2009-10 Australians paid 61 per cent (\$4.7 billion) of the total cost of dental services (\$7.7b) out of their own pockets - illustrating the need to initially focus new investments in dental care on those on low incomes and otherwise disadvantaged, a high proportion of whom live rurally.

Rural and remote people should be at the head of the queue for better dental services, provided through improved child and school dental services, a modified chronic disease dental program and enhanced public dental schemes.

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