

Dental hole left by Budget

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The gaping hole in dental care remains after the Federal Budget failed to include any funding for public dental services, according to the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association (AHHA).

The AHHA is the peak national body representing public hospitals, area health services, community health centres and public aged care providers.

"The AHHA welcomes COAG's commitment to a universal and equitable health system however this commitment is undermined by the failure of successive Governments to ensure better access to dental care for all Australians. The result is that Australia is a country where the poor and disadvantaged can be identified by the state of their teeth," Ms Prue Power, Executive Director, said today.

"The AHHA is appalled that the Government and Opposition have failed to reach agreement on even the most basic program to help at least 300,000 people in desperate need of oral health care. The Commonwealth Dental Health Program (CDHP) would have seen well over half a million pensioners and low income earners gain timely access to dental treatment and restoration. This program was part of the Rudd Government's election platform in 2007 and it has never seen the light of day.

"It has been convenient for the Federal Government to treat the Senate stalemate over dental care as an apparent budget-saving measure. The CDHP is a relatively small amount of money (\$290 million over three years). But the Government made its implementation contingent on closure of the previous Coalition Government's Medicare Chronic Disease Dental Plan.

"In this same period, however, due to the Rudd Government's failure to even attempt resolution of the conflict, the Medicare program has continued unabated which has ended up costing significantly more than the CDHP would have. The stubbornness in resisting negotiation has made this a budget blow-out.

"Ultimately, AHHA supports the proposal from the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission for a universal dental program, such as Denticare, which focuses on providing preventive care and is integrated with other components of our health system. The Government should work towards this aim through incremental steps which initially focus on ensuring better access to affordable and timely oral health care for those who need it most. Implementing a public dental health program immediately will build the foundations of a Denticare-like program. This includes addressing key factors such as the need to build the dental workforce needed to meet the increased demand for dental care that would flow from improved affordability of private dental care and an enhanced public dental sector.

"We cannot have a high quality and comprehensive health system unless we ensure that all Australians can readily access and afford preventive and restorative dental care. The continuing failure to include oral health in the current reform process will undermine COAG's stated commitment to a universal health system for all Australians.

"We urgently call on the Government to adopt the common-sense policy position proposed by the AHHA to revise the Medicare program and implement the Commonwealth Dental Health Program as promised – this will be a sure election winner," Ms Power said.

To engage in the debate, come to *Chomping Into Reform* in Melbourne on 3-4 June. To view the program and register visit <http://bit.ly/aXNsxf>. Early-bird closes on 19 May.

For further information/comment: Ms Prue Power 0417 419 857