

Submission to the Productivity Commission re Caring for Older Australians

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Purpose: The aim of this submission is to draw to the attention of the Commission the changing pattern of oral health needs of older Australians and the consequential costs to the individual and to the public health system.

Background: Recent Australian population-based and residential care oral health surveys^{1,2} have starkly indicated major changes in the oral health status of older Australians who are maintaining more teeth for life. The irony of this improvement in oral health is that these teeth and supporting tissues become a high risk to rapid deterioration should an individual's personal skills decline as a result of physical or mental capacity.

Dental technology and dental treatments are becoming increasingly sophisticated with crowns, bridges, implants and partial dentures increasingly used to improve the aesthetics and function of the dentition. Dental services are becoming more expensive with the average cost of a dental visit for those aged 65-74 years of \$366 or an average expenditure of \$562 per year³.

Over 50 per cent of the NSW community are eligible for access to free public dental care. However less than 10 per cent of expenditure on dental services is through the public sector.

49 per cent of NSW adults have private dental insurance,⁴ with significantly lower proportions of those over 75 years (37%), those in rural areas (41 %) and those in the most disadvantaged quintile (34%) having private dental health insurance.

The Medicare Chronic Disease Dental Scheme (CDDS) spent \$576.5 million dollars in FY 2009/10, with 42 % of clients over the age of 65 years. The Medicare CDDS has been identified by the Commonwealth Minister for Health for cessation should the Senate pass the necessary legislation. It was scheduled to be replaced by a new public sector targeted dental program in 2008.

The Australian Government, as yet, has not taken up the National Health and Hospital Reform Commission⁵ recommendations on reforming the Australian oral health system and introducing universal access to dental care through a Denticare Australia scheme.

In March 2009 the Australian Government introduced a national-wide training program for carers in residential care institutions based on the Better Oral Health in Residential Care Program⁶. This program had a one-off training funding allocation but no on-going infrastructure or funding commitment.

Key Considerations:

- Oral health and access to oral health services are rapidly becoming substantial public health and cost issues for older Australians. Ensuring equity and access to dental services are fundamental. Serious consideration must be given to improving national health insurance for dental care.
- National strategies must be developed to:
 1. Minimise the risk of deterioration of natural teeth in older people through greater social marketing, health information and cross-sector recognition of oral health as an integral component of general health.

2. Provide priority early access to dental care for older persons. Increase the range of dental services which can be provided by allied health, dental hygienists and oral health therapists including assessment and preventive services.
 3. Deliver sustainable oral health to maintain adequate nutrition, oral function, quality of life and self-esteem. Establish dental teams with an appropriate range of skills to provide dental care through community-based clinics, nursing homes and home visits.
 4. Prioritise access to oral health services based on the level of disability and capacity for self-care; and
 5. Ensure that the total health system provides a comfortable dentition free from pain within a pluralistic private and public provider structure.
- Strengthen professional leadership in geriatric dentistry through education and research within universities, public dental services and the dental professions.
 - Coordinate clinical and funding pathways across the health sector to provide continuity of dental care across the full course of life.

References

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5. A Healthier Future For All Australians – Final Report of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission – June 2009. Canberra: Australian Government
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