

Oral health: planning for next year's Budget must start now

Members of the National Oral Health Alliance (NOHA) have welcomed this week's announcements on dental health, in the belief that they are precursors to major action promised by the Government for 2011-12 and for the Budget in May 2012.

The Labor Government came to office in 2007 with a platform which included major new investment in oral health services for less well-off Australians through national leadership and the provision of better public dental services. This commitment was reiterated in the Gillard Government's formal agreement with the Greens.

Initial action to meet these commitments has been detailed in this week's Budget. The Government will allocate \$0.5 million to establish a National Advisory Council on Dental Health "to provide advice to the Minister on options to address priority areas for dental health".

In addition, the Budget has allocated \$52.6 million over the next three years for a new voluntary dental internship program and members of NOHA look forward to contributing to its development and roll-out.

The Government has also re-committed to the introduction of a new Commonwealth Dental Health Program (CDHP) and will evaluate trials that have been undertaken of mobile dental facilities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The Medicare-funded Chronic Disease Dental Scheme (CDDS) is planned to end on 31 December 2011, with unspecified funding switched to the CDHP. This will see the Commonwealth Government funding state and territory governments for additional public dental services over three years.

Priority in the new CDHP must be given to eligible people with chronic conditions relating to their oral health, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and preschool children. There will have to be a transitional strategy and sufficient CDHP funding to provide services to people in need.

Poor oral health is largely preventable through regular dental care and oral health promotion. It is quite unnecessary and unacceptable in this affluent nation that so many children and adults have shockingly poor oral health. Action on oral health must be the absolute number one priority for new health expenditure in the 2012 Budget.

NOHA believes that an improved oral health system is a critical part of a more equitable and effective health system. It has been promoting a plan to meet the needs of the over 30 per cent of Australians who indicate that they currently go without or delay dental care due to cost or unavailability of services. The NOHA plan focuses on oral health promotion and prevention.

National Oral Health Alliance members



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