

MEDIA RELEASE

18 March 2022

National Leadership for Oral Health – Call for Action!

20 March 2022, World Oral Health Day

Oral health is a major gap within Australia’s universal health system. If you have dental pain, Medicare doesn’t cover you to see the dentist. If you live in a rural and remote area, access to a dental practitioner is scarce. About 4 in 10 people avoid seeing a dental practitioner due to cost.

This World Oral Health Day, the National Oral Health Alliance (NOHA) calls for the major parties to commit to long overdue reform in oral health policy by establishing universal access to oral healthcare. The NOHA is a consortium of consumer, community services, aged care and peak professional member organisations dedicated to improving the oral health of all Australians.

Mr Tan Nguyen, NOHA Spokesperson said, “Oral health matters to everyday Australians. The Government must act. NOHA calls for national leadership to put the 2015-2024 National Oral Health Plan’s principles, agreed by COAG Health Ministers, into action and to secure the revenue needed to meet the needs of the community for dental services.”

New data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare¹ reveals that in 2020–21, around 3 in 10 (32%) who needed to see a dental professional delayed seeing or did not see one at least once in the previous 12 months, and around 1 in 7 (15%) reported that cost was a reason for delaying or not seeing a dental professional. People aged 55–64 years (62%) were more likely to have needed to see a dental professional than any other age group. The implementation of the SDBS will address unmet oral health needs and support healthy ageing.

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (RCACQS)² and other inquiries have highlighted funding requirements for oral health. NOHA believes the Federal Government’s first priority should be the full implementation of the oral health recommendations by the Royal Commission, including a Senior Dental Benefits Scheme (SDBS) by 2023, and a substantial funding boost for public dental services and targeted programs for rural and remote areas.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2022. Oral health and dental care in Australia. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/dental-oral-health/oral-health-and-dental-care-in-australia/contents/patient-experience>

² Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. 2021. Final Report - List of Recommendations. Available from: <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/final-report-list-recommendations>

Ian Yates, COTA Australia's CEO, says, "All governments must act immediately on the Royal Commission's recommendations. Poor oral health is a critical health and wellbeing issue. A Senior Dental Benefits Scheme is a win-win. Not only will it enhance older people's lives but, as a preventive health measure, to lessen broader health system pressures."

Dr Cassandra Goldie, CEO of the Australian Council of Social Services, said, "A substantial boost to funding for public dental services is urgently needed to improve access for people on low incomes. People on very low incomes are being forced to delay or forego dental treatment due to prohibitive costs and long waiting times for public dental. One consequence is too many preventable hospitalisations – 67,000 in 2019-20."

"A key step towards universal access to oral healthcare is expanding the Child Dental Benefits Scheme model to a Seniors Dental Benefit Scheme for older Australians," says Ms Leanne Wells, the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum of Australia. "Targeted programs are also needed in areas where people cannot get timely access to dental practitioners".

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NOHA Members supporting this Media Release

- Aged & Community Services Australia
- Australian Council of Social Service
- Australian Dental Association
- Australian Dental and Oral Health Therapists' Association
- Australian Dental Prosthetists Association
- Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association
- Consumers Health Forum of Australia
- Council on the Ageing (COTA) Australia
- Dental Hygienists' Association of Australia
- National Rural Health Alliance
- Public Health Association of Australia
- Royal Flying Doctors Service
- Victorian Oral Health Alliance

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