
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Bridging the Dental Gap

Report on the inquiry into adult dental services

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing

June 2013
Canberra

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Foreword

While advances in clinical practice and fluoridation of water have seen significant improvements, it is still the case that almost all Australians will experience an oral or dental health problem at some time in their lives. Currently, over 90 per cent of adults show signs of treated or untreated dental decay.

And yet, for many Australians the costs of accessing private dental services are prohibitive. Furthermore, with an estimated 400,000 adults on dental waiting lists across Australia, even those who qualify for public dental services frequently have to wait weeks or even months for treatment. What this points to, is a dental health system that is in need of significant reform.

In 2012 the Australian Government committed to a \$4.1 billion Dental Reform Package. Within the package, \$1.3 billion has been earmarked for the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Adult Dental Services, which is the focus of this inquiry. The NPA, to be delivered from 1 July 2014, will provide additional dental services in each of the states and territories to those adults who need it most.

During the inquiry the Committee considered how the NPA might be framed to optimise delivery of these additional public dental services. Importantly, with a history of dental health policy that is characterised by changing priorities and sporadic short-term funding, the Committee has also looked to the future. The Committee has recommended that the Australian Government continue to work with state and territory governments to achieve a coordinated, sustainable and strategic approach to dental policy.

Ultimately, the Committee would like to see a system that enables all Australians to access dental and oral health services – whoever they are, where ever they live and whenever they need them. I believe that implementation of the Dental Reform Package, including the Adult Dental Services NPA, represents significant progress toward achieving this worthy goal.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank all those who participated in the inquiry by providing written submissions or attending the public hearings and roundtable discussions held in Canberra and Dubbo. I also thank Charles Sturt University for hosting the Committee's public hearing in Dubbo.

Ms Jill Hall MP
Chair



Membership of the Committee

Chair Ms Jill Hall MP

Deputy Chair Mr Steve Irons MP

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Terms of reference

The National Partnership Agreement (NPA) for adult public dental services is a significant component of the Australian Government's Dental Care Reform Package. Under the NPA, from 1 July 2014, the Australian Government will provide funding to state and territory governments to expand services for adults in the public dental system.

To identify priorities and inform the NPA such that it can be framed to meet the particular and localised needs of each state and territory, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing will inquire into and report on the provision of adult dental services.

Specifically, the Committee will consider:

- demand for dental services across Australia and issues associated with waiting lists;
- the mix and coverage of dental services supported by state and territory governments, and the Australian Government;
- availability and affordability of dental services for people with special dental health needs;
- availability and affordability of dental services for people living in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote locations;
- the coordination of dental services between the two tiers of government and with privately funded dental services; and
- workforce issues relevant to the provision of dental services.



List of recommendations

3 Priority areas for adult dental services

Recommendation 1

The Australian Government include principles in the Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement which require state and territory governments to develop improved linkages with private providers of dental services and not-for-profit organisations to help deliver dental services to patients in need.

Recommendation 2

The Department of Health and Ageing and Health Workforce Australia work with the Dental Board of Australia to amend the professional scope of practice registration standards to allow dental hygienists, dental therapists and oral health therapists to practice independently.

Recommendation 3

The Department of Health and Ageing investigate enabling dental hygienists, dental therapists and oral health therapists to hold Medicare provider numbers so that they can practice independently as solo practitioners within the scope of practice parameters stipulated by their professional practice registration standards.

The provision of Medicare provider numbers to these practitioners could be piloted.

Recommendation 4

The Australian Government include principles in the Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement which require state and territory governments to develop improved linkages with private providers of dental services and not-for-profit organisations so that patients living in areas where public dental services are not available or are oversubscribed have better access to care.

Recommendation 5

The Australian Government include incentives in the Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement to encourage state and territory governments to improve the focus on preventive dental services as a component of addressing overall dental and oral health.

4 Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement framework

Recommendation 6

The Australian Government, in negotiation with state and territory governments, develop a formula for the allocation of funding to state and territory governments under the Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement based on the size and distribution of priority population groups, including:

- concession card holder population;
- geographic spread of the population;
- the Indigenous population; and
- other priority population groups such as people with disabilities, people with chronic diseases, people on low incomes or people who are homeless.

Recommendation 7

The Australian Government include a 'maintenance of effort' clause in the Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement, similar to that included in the Dental Waiting List National Partnership Agreement. This clause should specify that state and territory governments must maintain public dental clinical activity for adults, so that additional funding provided under the Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement is used to increase current effort.

Recommendation 8

The Australian Government develop a performance and reporting framework for the Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement that will accurately and objectively assess progress towards achieving agreed benchmarks for service delivery and clinical outcomes.

In consultation with state and territory governments, and with private providers of dental services, consideration should be given to a range of key performance indicators that will allow for monitoring of:

- changes to the levels of clinical activity;
- preventive services as a proportion of all services delivered; and
- targeting of services to specific population groups.

In developing the performance and reporting framework, consideration must be given to making use of existing data collection and reporting systems to maximise administrative efficiency and minimise reporting burden.

Recommendation 9

The Australian Government include provision in the Adult Dental Services National Partnership Agreement that requires all signatories to commence negotiations for a new National Partnership Agreement (or alternative funding model) at least 12 months prior to its expiration.

Recommendation 10

The Department of Health and Ageing, in consultation with state and territory governments and other key stakeholders, examine the case to appoint a Commonwealth Chief Dental Officer or establish an independent advisory body to:

- improve coordination between the Australian Government, and state and territory governments;
- increase engagement with the private sector, particularly private providers of dental services; and
- provide independent policy advice on dental and oral health.

Recommendation 11

The Australian Government commit to a robust dental policy framework that guarantees the long-term sustainability of the public dental sector as a provider of dental services through ongoing funding support.

Recommendation 12

The Australian Government, in consultation with state and territory governments and other key stakeholders, establish and commit to an implementation strategy for the National Oral Health Plan 2014-2023.

Recommendation 13

The Australian Government adopt a strategic policy approach which supports deliberate and phased progress toward a universal access to dental services scheme for Australia.