

11th April 2012

Dear Minister,

I would like to express my thoughts relating to the Chronic Disease Dental Scheme (CDDS). Having treated patients under the Veterans' Affairs Scheme, which is quite simple to follow, I assumed that the Chronic Disease Dental Scheme would be similar in structure.

Instead:-

- 1) No clear guidelines were ever set out.
- 2) There have always been contradicting answers given to our receptionist when ringing the Medicare Help Desk
- 3) There was never clear information given to the patients with regards to how the scheme worked or how long the patient had to complete treatment. Furthermore, during the life of the scheme there have been at least three changes as to what was considered the start and finish timeframe for treatment, and this was without written notification to the practitioner. For instance, it is my understanding that at the beginning of the scheme the patient had two years from the date of referral by the GP. Now it has become two years from the commencement of dental treatment but ending at the end of the second calendar year, i.e. if the patient is seen for the first time in December the patient has only the remainder of that month and the following calendar year to receive treatment under the scheme. We are yet to see a patient who is aware of this clause. They all believe they have two full years, as do most of the GPs (and staff) to whom we have spoken. All these changes have never been communicated clearly or in a timely fashion.
- 4) No clear information as to what happens when a patient receives a second EPC referral before the first one has expired. I have been left out-of-pocket when claims have been rejected due to the GP issuing another referral. The GP is obviously unaware of the consequences to the dental practitioner and Medicare staff has been unhelpful and unsympathetic when my staff have rung to see why the payment was rejected.
- 5) No clear guidelines as to the paperwork requirements, in fact it was never specified that a practitioner would be penalised if they didn't carry out the administrative requirements exactly as now outlined by the scheme. And there was certainly never any mention that omitting to submit certain letters would carry such a hefty fine.

As professional dental practitioners, we always get informed consent from our patients after outlining all treatment options, and that obviously carries through to our Medicare patients. It seems a little unreasonable that letters to the patients' GPs had to be sent prior to commencing treatment even if the patient was in pain, in a wheelchair or just unable to make multiple trips. The scheme is there to help the chronically ill and yet its design doesn't take into account the fact that they are medically compromised!!

One can understand that fraudulent activity needs to be punished but if one unwittingly omits to comply with an administrative process (that was never clear in the first place) should they be crucified?? If quality dental work is provided after informed consent from the patient is obtained, if technician fees and auxiliary staff wages have been paid, is it justifiable that the whole amount for treatment be returned on the basis of a few administrative omissions??

It appears that there was insufficient monitoring of administrative compliance by Medicare. Monitoring and some sort of feedback could have been given to practitioners in the first year of the scheme's operation. If practitioners then didn't comply, some sort of fine may have been justifiable. But of course the nature of the fine would have to have been outlined and communicated to each and every dentist so that they were aware of the consequences.

Fair treatment of dentists is what we ask for. Most dentists involved in the scheme are doing so to provide much needed treatment for the medically compromised and the elderly. Often treating these patients is much more challenging than treating private patients and we are doing this at Medicare rebate prices only (which often doesn't cover our overheads). We do that to give back to our society. To be treated like criminals and to discredit the dental profession in such a manner is unfathomable and unjust!!!

Yours sincerely,

Dr Zoe Skourides.