

MEDIA RELEASE

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Urgent action needed to fix Australia's teeth

A new National Oral Health Alliance* is calling for urgent attention to the oral health problems experienced by ordinary Australians. The Alliance brings together health professionals and consumer, community and welfare groups.

Oral Health Facts:

- About 650,000 people are on waiting lists around Australia for general dental care from public dental services – the average time on a waiting list is 27 months.
- 40% of Australians can not access dental care when they need it.
- There will be a national shortage of around 1,500 dental staff by 2010.
- Consumers contributed nearly \$3.4 billion or 67% of funding for dental services in 2004-05, compared to only \$953 million from Government (19%) and \$701 million from private health insurance funds (14%).

Launching the Alliance today, **ACOSS Executive Director Andrew Johnson** said: "In these good economic times no Australian should miss out on basic dental care when they need it. The Federal Government must take urgent action to address the widespread oral health problems faced by so many people, particularly low income and disadvantaged Australians."

Australian Dental Association President John Matthews, said, "Those who need dental care most are often not receiving it. A Federally funded program that addressed the needs of those in greatest financial and oral health needs would be welcomed. The ADA believes that all spheres of Government working together will have a marked effect on improving access to care."

Health Issues Centre CEO, Tony McBride, said, "There is no clearer indicator of socio-economic status in Australia than the state of people's teeth. Yet the Federal Government currently doesn't fund dental services to those in most need - it provides over \$300 million subsidy for the dental care of generally better off Australians via private health insurance. The Federal Government needs to reconsider this unfair allocation and provide significant support to those Australians who actually have much worse oral health status."

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (NACCHO) CEO, Dea Delaney Thiele, said "Poor oral health and a profound lack of dental care services fill our people with pain, shame and daily misery. Four out of five Aboriginal children have dental disease and this soon leads to tooth loss, problems with eating, loss of sleep, low self-esteem, profound speech problems and acute pain. "Only the Commonwealth government has the resources to tackle this crippling issue. But does it have the heart and the compassion to deliver help for Australia's poorest people?"

Chairman of the Association for the Promotion of Oral Health, Associate Professor Hans Zoellner said "It is time to bring the mouth back into the body, and properly support dental services and training with Medicare and internships. Confusion about State—Federal responsibilities for dentistry has shamelessly exploited by all sides of government to evade their dental responsibilities. The mouth is important for speech, facial expression, breathing, cosmetics and sex. It's not just for eating."

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Executive Director of the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA), Gordon Gregory, said "Oral and dental health has been among the top five issues for the NRHA for several years. Poor dental health is common in rural areas where there are serious shortages of dentists and lower incomes overall. It's a situation that Australia could readily fix through greater investment and it's long been our view that the Federal Government should lead on this."

Executive Director Dietitians Association of Australia, Claire Hewat, said, "The nutritional health of Australians is strongly linked with their oral health in both cause and effect. Those in greatest need of oral health care are also those with the greatest burden of life style diseases such as obesity and cardiovascular disease which we know is higher amongst disadvantaged groups."

Australian Federation of Disability Organisations CEO, Maryanne Diamond, said, "Australians with disability struggle to afford dental treatment. Household incomes of people with disability are substantially lower than the general population (23%). Faced with dental emergencies, some people are being forced to choose between having necessary treatment or buying food. It is vital that the Commonwealth Government act urgently to make dental care affordable for everyone."

President of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP), Professor Nip Thomson, said, "Access to affordable, appropriate and timely dental care remains out of the reach for many Australians. The impact of poor oral health extends further than simply the mouth. There is increasing evidence of the links between poor oral health and cardio vascular disease, diabetes, gum disease, poor nutrition and oral cancer. It is particularly impacting on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in the community.

"The RACP encourages the government to implement change so that we have a fairer and more effective oral health system for all Australians," Professor Nip Thomson, RACP President said.

President of the Australian Dental and Oral Health Therapists' Association, Julie Barker, said "The impact that poor oral health has on general health and wellbeing is well recognised . The ability of people to eat, speak, work and socialise is affected when their oral health is in poor condition. It is those in low to middle income groups that bear the greatest burden of this enormous gap in health services. The ADOHTA believes there is an urgent need for the Commonwealth Government to invest in oral health for all Australians."

Rural Dental Action Group Co Founder, Marj Bollinger, said, "Over 50% of the population are eligible for treatment in Public Dental Clinics with 10% dentists expected to provide services, State and Federal Governments must act immediately to change this imbalance particularly in rural areas where in some instances services are non existent".

* The National Oral Health Alliance is supported by ACOSS, the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia, Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations, Australian Dental Association, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, the National Rural Health Alliance, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Health Issues Centre, the Association for the Promotion of Oral Health, Dietitians' Association of Australia, Carers Australia, Australian Dental and Oral Health Therapists' Association, Rural Dental Action Group, UnitingCare Australia, Refugee Council of Australia, Australian Nursing Federation, National Welfare Rights Network, National Association of Community Legal Centres, Australian Health Care Reform Alliance, National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS, COTA Overs 50s, National Seniors, Australian Pensioners and Superannuants Federation, Doctors Reform Society, Dental Hygienists' Association of Australia, St Vincent de Paul Society, Salvation Army, Catholic Social Services Australia, Hanover Welfare Services, Choice, Public Health Association of Australia, SANE Australia.