



## A REPORT CARD ON FEDERAL DENTAL HEALTH POLICIES

### ELECTION 2007

#### Question 1

Taking into consideration that there is a current mal-distribution in the supply of dentists throughout Australia, which is adversely impacting on dental health delivery, what steps does your party propose to take in relation to addressing this issue? Do you think the initiatives announced in this area in the budget will address the issues?

#### Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

In the Budget this year two new measures were announced to increase the number of dentists and other health professionals in rural and regional areas. A new School of Dentistry and Oral Health will be established at Charles Sturt University, NSW, at a cost of \$64.5 million over four years. The school will expand dental training and public dental service provision in regional Australia. The new dental training program will include delivering services to public patients at several regional locations. Funding will be provided to Charles Sturt University to construct pre-clinical and clinical facilities in Orange and Wagga Wagga and three dental education clinics in Albury, Bathurst and Dubbo. As part of the package, 240 new training places for dental and oral health students will be available over five years.

The Coalition Government will also provide \$12.5 million over four years to support up to 30 annual clinical placements for dentistry students in established rural training settings. This package also offers three scholarships for Indigenous dental students under the Puggy Hunter Memorial Scholarship Scheme.

A study into future dental workforce needs is currently being undertaken. This study informed by the views of the dental profession will help to provide evidence for future dental workforce decisions.

#### Australian Labor Party

No response received

#### Australian Democrats

The funding to assist in the establishment of a dental facility at Charles Sturt University announced in the Federal Budget will go some way to addressing the mal-distribution but is not a national solution. More needs to be done. Incentives to encourage dentists to work in geographic areas of need, similar to those available to medical practitioners, are needed, as is flexible funding options for dental services in those areas. Providing more scholarships for dental students from rural and remote areas and incentives for new graduates would also assist, as would the provision of walk-in, walk-out dental clinics in areas of need.

#### Australian Greens

The Australian Greens believe that an effective health care system is dependent upon a skilled, well-resourced workforce. We are aware that the supply of dentists is both inadequate in number and mal-distributed, particularly in rural and remote areas. We will initiate, and/or support, initiatives designed to increase student places at dental schools, in addition to places for dental therapists and hygienists. This will include the provision of funding for staffing and facilities to ensure high quality training and mentorship programs and effective measures to attract health professionals to rural and remote areas. The initiatives announced in the budget go some way to address these issues, but

more needs to be done.

### Question 2

The retention of the rebate for Private Health Insurance premiums. Does your party consider that this is an effective measure in assisting Australians to access dental health care? Do Private Health Insurers, in your party's view, provide effective assistance to Australians in obtaining dental health delivery?

Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

Yes.

The majority of dental health services in Australia are provided in private practice. For many Australians, especially families, the key to accessing affordable services has been through their private health insurance cover. Australian Government funding for these services is provided through the Private Health Insurance Rebates. The dollar value attributable to dental services in 2005-06 is estimated to be \$343 million. Affordable dental services for those aged over 65 years has been improved from 1 April 2005, the Coalition increased the Rebate to 35 per cent for people aged 65 to 69 years and to 40 per cent for people aged 70 years and over.

Australian Labor Party

No response received

Australian Democrats

One in three adults avoids dental care because of the costs but private health insurance subsidies only assist those people with private health insurance coverage. Even then the way health insurance companies handle dental care means that people face large out-of-pocket costs for even basic dental treatment. The Federal Government should be ensuring that all Australians have access to dental care by providing funding for public dental services.

Australian Greens

The Australian Greens will redirect the \$3 billion from the Private Health Insurance Rebate to the public health system, including the public dental system. The Greens are concerned about the growing divide in the Australian population illustrated most dramatically in the statistics on oral health. The PHIR works to promote the dental health of those who can afford to pay for their dental care using resources that should be used to restore and expand the public dental system which provides dental care for the most disadvantaged in our community. The growing public dental waiting lists and poor health status of many Australians over the past decade highlight the ineffectiveness of this policy.

### Question 3

With the very long waiting lists that exist for patients to obtain treatment through the public sector, what steps does your party propose to take in relation to improving access for the financially disadvantaged to dental services?

Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

It is a concern that Australians in some states and territories are experiencing difficulties accessing quality public dental services in a timely manner. However, as these services are the responsibility of states and territories, questions of whether they are adequately resourced are matters for the State and Territory governments. The Coalition Government has helped take pressure off state and territory public dental waiting lists by expanding the availability of dental care in areas for which it is responsible. This support includes providing rebate for a million people with incomes under \$26,000 holding private health insurance.

Australian Labor Party

No response received

#### Australian Democrats

The Democrats propose a national public dental health program that is free for concession card holders and special needs groups, and which includes a full dental check-up and basic dental treatment every two years. This program should be funded at per capita levels that will meet the goals of the national oral health plan and delivered in a timely manner, as determined by national benchmarks – with costs to be shared equally between the Commonwealth and the States. Improved salaries and conditions for dentists working in the public sector are also necessary and could be supported by incentives such as fee forgiveness for graduates who agree to spend some time in the public system.

#### Australian Greens

Sadly oral health status is the clearest indicator of the growing gap between rich and poor in Australia. Low-income Australians have the worst oral health status across all indicators. The Greens understand that good oral health is essential to good general health. For these reasons, the Greens' policy goal is to introduce a 'Denticare system' which would provide universal dental care under the Medicare model. The Greens will reintroduce the Commonwealth Dental Health Program for low income earners and pensioners. As stated above, the Greens will use the funds currently directed to the PHIR to restore and expand public dental services to address the poor access to dental care. We understand the workforce issues, including recruitment in the public sector. Years of downgrading, loss of resources and facilities in the public dental sector makes it difficult to attract and keep dentists in public dental services. Increased federal funding to appropriate levels will improve access for financially disadvantaged Australians.

#### Question 4

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people experience significantly poorer oral health than the general population what initiatives in the area of indigenous dental health delivery would be proposed by your party?

#### Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

The Coalition provides significant funds for dental care through the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. Further measures will be considered as part of the Government's emergency response to Indigenous health issues in the Northern Territory Government.

#### Australian Labor Party

No response received

#### Australian Democrats

The Democrats would introduce special outreach dental services for Indigenous populations, delivered where possible by indigenous people and which include a focus on oral health promotion. This would include oral health training of existing primary care staff working in indigenous communities. Increased resources to improve diet and access to fluoridated water are also critical, as are improved living conditions generally.

#### Australian Greens

The Australian Greens would ensure funding for health services, including dental services, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that will raise their health status to a level comparable to other Australians. We support the call by the AMA and NACCHO and OXFAM, for \$500 million annually to be directed to Indigenous communities to achieve this goal. We will work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and relevant agencies to deliver accessible, culturally-appropriate and community-controlled dental health services; and support and add to current innovations that facilitate the training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dental health professionals.

#### Question 5

Older people, particularly those with cognitive impairment, are at risk in developing oral disease. Access for these people to dental care is difficult particularly if living in residential accommodation or, if experiencing limited mobility. What measures will you create to improve delivery of dental care in this area?

#### Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

The Government has funded the development of an oral health assessment tool for medical practitioners to use in residential aged care facilities. Information from this assessment will allow the inclusion of oral health interventions in the residents' care plans and help to deliver better dental care.

From 1 April 2005, the Coalition increased the Private Health Insurance Rebate to 35 per cent for people aged 65 to 69 years and to 40 per cent for people aged 70 years and over. This will help to provide affordable dental services for those aged over 65 years.

From 1 November 2007 (subject to the passage of legislation), new Medicare rebates for dental services will be available to people with chronic conditions and complex care needs. Eligible patients will be able to access up to \$4,250 in Medicare benefits (including Medicare Safety Net benefits where applicable) for dental services received over two consecutive calendar years.

New Medicare items will be introduced for services such as dental assessments, preventative services, extractions, fillings and other restorative work, and dentures.

The new arrangements will be targeted at people with chronic conditions and complex care needs where the person's oral health is impacting on, his/her general health. To be eligible, patients will need to be managed by their GP through specific care planning arrangements, and be referred by their GP to a dentist.

This new measure should be of particular benefit to older Australians who are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions.

#### Australian Labor Party

No response received

#### Australian Democrats

Greater funding for public dental care would increase access for many older people. This should be accompanied by funding for mandatory dental health assessment and follow-up by dental hygienists in residential aged care and oral health training of residential aged care staff.

#### Australian Greens

The Greens will call for the immediate reintroduction of the Commonwealth Dental Health Program for low income earners and pensioners, and investigate the establishment universal 'Denticare' system. An increased dental workforce, including dental therapists and hygienists will facilitate greater opportunities for home and residential dental care working through appropriate programs such as HACC.

#### Question 6

Whilst many Australian children also enjoy relatively good oral health, gains made in childhood oral health are diminishing. Please identify what targeted measures your party would introduce to improve dental health delivery and dental health generally of these Australians.

#### Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

The Australian Government and the States and Territories play different roles in supporting Australia's mixed system of public and private dental health care. While school dental programs are the responsibility of State and Territory governments, private health insurance also provides access to regular health care for children. The Coalition Government will continue to look at ways of ensuring Australian children get access to a range of important health care services.

#### Australian Labor Party

No response received

#### Australian Democrats

The Democrats support funding for universal screening and dental hygiene programs in all primary schools and a ban on food advertising to children. We also favour a 'traffic light' system of food and beverage labelling that would identify and warn against high sugar content.

Australian Greens

The Greens believe that an effective health system is based on primary health care and preventative health care. Oral health promotion is a key component of that. We will increase public and school education about dental health. We will reinstate the school dental program with matched federal-state funding. And the Greens will introduce legislation to promote healthy choices, including a ban on junk food advertising on children's television.

Question 7

The ADA has always believed that the most effective way to improve dental health and reduce long term health costs would be to invest in oral health promotion programs which would focus on risk factors that contribute to poor oral health. Does your party propose investment in such campaigns and if so, please identify your proposals?

Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

In line with the approach of the National Oral Health Plan the Government sees oral health promotion as an integral part of general health promotion, which is addressed through measures which focus on improving diet and nutrition, and reducing smoking. In addition, the Government funds regular surveys of the oral health of adults and children which inform policy development in relation to preventative measures. The responsibility for promoting better dental health is shared by schools, parents, dentists, their professional associations and government. The Coalition is happy to consider other promotional proposals that will result in better dental health.

Australian Labor Party

No response received

Australian Democrats

The Australian Democrats strongly support a re-balancing of health funding so that greater resources are allocated to preventing the emergence of health problems, rather than focusing on the provision of more expensive treatment options once the problems have developed. We would commit funding for a national oral health public education campaign focused on increasing knowledge and awareness of risk factors for poor dental health and the need for better dental care.

Australian Greens

See 6 above.

Question 8

With the publication of the *National Adult Oral Health Survey* it is clear that fluoridation of public water supplies has proven to be a safe, effective and equitable public health measure for reducing the prevalence of dental decay in all age groups. Many community water supplies are still not fluoridated. What measures would your party adopt to achieve universal fluoridation of water supplies?

Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

The fluoridation of water is a State and Territory responsibility.

Australian Labor Party

No response received

Australian Democrats

We are aware that there are different views about the safety and effectiveness of fluoridated water and would encourage community education and debate about the risks and

benefits.

#### Australian Greens

The Greens recognize that fluoridation of water has had a positive impact on reducing the prevalence of dental decay; however we are aware of the scientific debate around the associated health risks. The Greens' approach to universal water fluoridation would be to ensure that communities are fully informed about the benefits and risks of water fluoridation and that water supplies would not be fluoridated against the wishes of the community.

#### Question 9

The revised EPC program has allowed chronically ill patients, with dental conditions, the ability to obtain dental treatment, if it will alleviate the chronic illness. Does your party have any intentions to modify this plan, and if so how?

#### Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

From 1 November 2007 (subject to the passage of legislation), new Medicare rebates for dental services will be available to people with chronic conditions and complex care needs. Eligible patients will be able to access up to \$4,250 in Medicare benefits (including Medicare Safety Net benefits where applicable) for dental services received over two consecutive calendar years. This is a change to the original Budget announcement.

New Medicare items will be introduced for services such as dental assessments, preventative services, extractions, fillings and other restorative work, and dentures.

These new arrangements will be targeted at people with chronic conditions and complex care needs where the person's oral health is impacting on, or is likely to impact on, their general health. To be eligible, patients will need to be managed by their GP through specific care planning arrangements, and be referred by their GP to a dentist.

This Medicare initiative is expected to cost \$384.6 million over four years and assist around 20,000 people. This is a major new commitment that will benefit many people eligible to receive care from State government public dental services. Further details about the new Medicare arrangements will be available from the Department of Health and Ageing later this year.

#### Australian Labor Party

No response received

#### Australian Democrats

While providing dental care for those with chronic illness is welcome, the EPC programme needs to be simplified. Finding a GP, getting him/her to jump the bureaucratic hoops for referral, and then finding a dentist willing and able to treat you makes it difficult for people to make use of the EPC programme. The programme should also be available to all financially disadvantaged Australians. They should not have to wait until they have a chronic illness before they can access dental care.

#### Australian Greens

The Greens' policy is the provision of dental services expanded to give all Australians who need dental care. We welcome the EPC programme in that it is designed to meet the dental care needs of a particular group who are clearly in need of dental services. The Greens believe that it could be improved to better meet its objectives, for example, greater clarity in the definition of chronic illness; GP training to better identify dental problems for referral and development of care plans and it should cover all necessary treatment such as the provision of general anaesthetic to ensure that dentists can provide the care required for people eligible for this program.

#### Question 10

Does your party support the creation of a consistent national regulatory model for the registration of Dentists and other dental personnel rather than the State based systems that exist now.

#### Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

Yes. The Coalition Government will ensure that registration arrangements continue to have appropriate oversight and input from the dental profession itself.

Australian Labor Party

No response received

Australian Democrats

Yes

Australian Greens

The Greens support a consistent national regulatory model which would overcome the diversity of state responses to a range of issues affecting the practise of dentistry in Australia, not just registration. A national regulatory system could also establish consistent measures for issues such as competency standards, patient and provider concerns, infection control issues, liability insurance for example.

#### Question 11

Currently dentists are liable to pay registration fees for their ability to practice in each State. In addition to perform their duties it is often necessary for them to pay additional registration fees to enable them to take radiographs or to use certain pieces of equipment. These charges add unreasonably to the cost of dental services. Does your party have any proposals to avoid this duplication of registration?

Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

The Coalition Government supports national consistency across the dental profession and the lowest achievable cost base for dentists. The Government is currently pursuing national medical and dental registration issues in line with the principles outlined in question 10 above.

Australian Labor Party

No response received

Australian Democrats

The development of the national registration and regulation model for dental care practitioners should include a scope of practice which includes all necessary tasks and a single fee.

Australian Greens

As identified in the answer to Question 10, an effective national regulatory model would provide consistency and certainty about costs and other issues and avoid duplication of registration.

#### Question 12

Given the relationship between oral health and general health, more research should be undertaken into ways of reducing the incidence of oral diseases, and reducing the cost of addressing the disease burden. Would your party support increased funding for such research, and if so how?

Liberal Party of Australia/The Nationals

The Coalition has a strong record in supporting dental and oral health research. Between 2000 and 2006 the National Health and Medical Research Council provided \$21.6 million

to fund 286 grants into dental and oral health research. In 2007, 32 grants have been made to a value of \$4.05 million.

**Australian Labor Party**

No response received

**Australian Democrats**

Yes. The Democrats support increased funding for research. Additional targeted funding should be provided to existing organizations and centres with oral health expertise to develop and implement a program of research into oral disease prevention.

**Australian Greens**

The Greens believe that the critical importance of oral health in promoting and maintaining good general health should be better understood. The research highlights the increase cost burden on the health system as a result of poor oral health. The work of the Dental Statistics and Research Unit (DSRU) in Adelaide, for example, has had a huge impact on understanding and policy development in dental health. There is no doubt that dental research generally is under-funded. The Greens support increased funding to dental research.