

Lack of universal dental care a hole that can be fixed

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Health consumers are falling through the gaps in health care when it comes to getting their teeth checked.

Consumers Health Forum (CHF) is calling for government to address the shortfall in oral health as a fundamental part of health care by including coverage for dental health care in Medicare.

Currently dental health care is not part of Medicare, which creates further barriers for people accessing regular dental treatment.

Consumers Health Forum CEO, Leanne Wells said that access to dental health care is a vital preventive health measure, as regular appointments provide oral health checks, professional cleaning and dental treatment.

“Dental care is unaffordable for many Australians and they are missing out on timely dental health checks and treatment which can reverse damage and rehabilitate diseased teeth and gums,” said Ms Wells.

According to the [National Oral Health Alliance \(NOHA\)](#), of which CHF is a member organisation, 30 % of Australians go without regular dental care due to cost, lack of services and other barriers.

It is widely [acknowledged that not seeing a dentist regularly](#) is associated with poorer health outcomes.

Access to affordable dental health care eases further pain, damage and discomfort. There is also [evidence that poor dental health impacts](#) on a range of significant health issues such as heart and lung diseases, stroke, serious conditions experienced by pregnant women, and oral cancers.

There are economic benefits from investing dental health care, with many preventable hospitalisations from dental causes.

“CHF is calling for a universal health scheme that treats oral and dental in the same way as any other medical condition,” said Ms Wells.

“Health consumers who do have access to public dental funding endure long waiting times to access the care they need,” she said.

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“But many people on low incomes do not meet the tight eligibility for public dental schemes.”

“CHF wants to see dental care incorporated into Medicare, so that people can get reimbursed when they access dental health services,” she said.

“We are asking the government to set a pathway to universal dental health care, and while we recognise this as a major undertaking, this can be achieved and managed effectively by using an incremental approach,” said Ms Wells.

“Cost barriers can be overcome with staged integration and the long-term value to the health care system would be recovered,” she said.

“We suggest introducing in the first twelve months, a dental benefits scheme for income support recipients and adults on low incomes, similar to the current [Child Dental Benefits Scheme](#). This could be a first step towards absorbing dental care into Medicare,” said Ms Wells.

“This scheme, which was identified as a [part of CHF’s Election Platform](#), would offer basic dental care with capped funding and choice of provider in the first twelve months,” she said.

“This is a critical and urgent health care reform which should be given priority,” she said.

“Taking these thought out measures to provide better access and affordability for oral health will be a significant step towards addressing disadvantage and health inequality for people on income support and low incomes,” said Ms Wells.

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