

## **Position Statement of National Oral Health Alliance**

The undersigned national community, dental and health organisations have formed an Alliance which aims to reverse the current poor state of oral health and dental care for low income and disadvantaged Australians, particularly adults.

The deep inequalities in access to oral health care for adult Australians are well documented, as are the problems suffered by so many as a result. Low-income Australians experience lengthy delays in treatment, or miss out altogether under an inadequately funded public system.

In Australia today there are:

- 650,000 people on waiting lists for public dental care with an average waiting time of 27 months.
- 5 million adults eligible for public dental care, many of whom experience acute problems of access to dental services.
- 2.1 million adults not eligible for public dental care but who delay or avoid treatment because of cost.

Those with particularly poor oral health and least likely to be able to access oral health care are low income adults, people living in rural and remote areas, indigenous people, nursing home residents, people with disabilities, young adults on income support payments and single parents.

The social impact of poor adult oral health is immense. Over a quarter of Australian adults experience severe pain because of problems with their teeth, mouth or dentures. A quarter avoids solid foods and nearly a third finds it uncomfortable to eat. Just under a quarter of Australian adults feel self-conscious or embarrassed because of oral health problems.

These problems are largely the result of poor planning and under-funding by governments in preventive oral health and basic dental care for disadvantaged Australians.

Just as important, there has been inadequate government investment in the development of a dental health workforce which is sufficient to meet current and future oral health requirements of those most in need.

In 2004, Australia's Health Ministers endorsed a National Oral Health Plan which outlined the policy directions needed between 2004-2013 to improve Australia's oral health and to provide access to good oral care for all Australians.

It is now over two years since the Health Ministers' endorsed the National Oral Health Plan. By this time, the agreed short term actions should have been implemented and the medium term actions well under way. Unfortunately, implementation has been unacceptably slow.

The Commonwealth Government is uniquely placed to exert its leadership in improving the oral health of low income and disadvantaged Australians. The Commonwealth Government's current Budget surplus is in excess of \$10 billion and the Prime Minister and the Council of Australian Governments recently demonstrated how national leadership can drive implementation in the case of mental health policy.

The National Oral Health Alliance calls on the Commonwealth Government to renew its commitment to oral health care for disadvantaged adults by taking responsibility for covering the minimum costs of their basic dental care. In return for making that investment, the Commonwealth Government should hold the States and Territories accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities under the National Oral Health Plan, including oral health promotion, expansion of water fluoridation, and planning and development of high quality and accessible adult oral health services.