

Media release



Low Income Victorians Missing out on Vital Dental Care and Prevention

Tony McBride, Chief Executive Officer
Mobile: 0407 531 468, Ph: (03) 9479 5827

Health Issues Centre is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that has been promoting consumer perspectives in the Australian health system since 1985. Our mission is to improve the health outcomes for Australians, especially those who are disadvantaged.

Embargoed until 5am 10 December 2008

"Most people joining public dental waiting lists in Victoria have very acute needs and much poorer oral health than the Australian average, according to our new study launched this week" said Tony McBride, CEO of Health Issues Centre today.

"Yet, despite improvements in recent years by the State Government, such low-income Victorians are still having to wait over two years at this centre for care – a totally unacceptable and unfair situation" he added. "The Senate's blockage of \$72.9 million of funding earmarked for public dental services is denying around 258,000 Victorians timely access to dental treatment".

Health Issues Centre with Dianella Community Health and Dental Health Services Victoria conducted a study with 246 public patients on the dental waiting lists. The study found strong evidence of continuing inequalities in oral health status. Compared to the national averages:

- about 50% had less than the 21 natural functional teeth - considered the minimum needed for adequate nutrition (national average 11%)
- they had nearly ten times higher advanced gum disease (22.2% vs 2.4%) and two and a half times for moderate gum disease (53.6% vs 20.5%).

"Alarming, less than 4% of the study participants had what could be described as healthy teeth and gums, and of those that had visited a dentist in last year, over half were for emergency treatment, Tony said. The report also indicated that, because of the high acute needs, a very low 8% of care was able to be focused on preventive care (eg. scaling and cleaning), despite the high need for it.

"This report shows the high needs of our clients and the urgency of increasing the level of dental services we can provide. We must be able to act quicker so that chronic conditions do not arise, as this report shows they are", said Dianella CEO Mark Sullivan.

"The Senate impasse on the Commonwealth Dental Health Program is denying thousands of low income earners, pensioners access to the dental care they need when they need it".

The study also studied the costs to the government of long waiting lists. There was little difference in costs to the system for the care planned for those at the beginning or end of the waiting lists. However, this calculation did not include any emergency treatment provided elsewhere (eg at Dental Hospital), or co-payments by consumers or the social costs on them. Also noteworthy was that the estimated cost of the dental work planned by dentists was much higher than the state average of public care actually provided in Victoria.

Mr McBride added that most people had some significant social impact from their poor dental status, eg ongoing pain and self-medication, poorer sleep, restrictions on what they ate, reduced self confidence.

"We need greater capacity in the system to reduce the dental waiting list," Tony concluded. "We also need greater focus on prevention and ways to maximise oral health while people wait for dental treatment."

Ends.

HEALTH ISSUES CENTRE, LEVEL 5, HEALTH SCIENCES 2, LA TROBE UNIVERSITY VIC 3086
PHONE: (03) 9479 5827 FAX: (03) 9479 5977