



Smile for the camera?

An election campaign kit for public dental services in NSW

In the lead-up to the State Election in early 2003, it is vital to send a message to all candidates and political parties that public dental services are important and that people in the community are concerned about problems with the system.

This campaign kit is designed for individuals and organisations concerned about access to dental services. Please use the information and questions in the kit in your meetings with Election candidates from all political parties.

People who cannot afford to pay for private dental care in NSW must depend on public dental services to care for their teeth. Yet there is a shortage of resources in the public system and often restrictions on the treatments available. As a result, thousands of people are forced to live with painful tooth problems. Many relatively minor oral health problems are only treated when they worsen, at considerably greater expense to the health system. These problems can affect a person's employment opportunities, self-esteem and general health.

The problem

In March 2001, the Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) estimated there were in excess of 250,000 disadvantaged people with tooth decay or gum disease living in NSW who were unable to obtain public dental treatment.

Low-income and other disadvantaged people – about a third of our community – experience delays in treatment or miss out altogether under an inadequately funded public system. This is particularly the case for older people, low income earners, people receiving income support payments, indigenous people and people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. People living in regional areas face additional problems caused by distances and shortages of dentists.

This situation reached crisis point after the Federal Government axed the Commonwealth Dental Health Program (CDHP) in its first Budget in 1997. In that year, there were up to 120,000 people in NSW waiting up to 4.5 years for public treatment. The NSW Government has addressed some of the shortfall, but while the extra money is a positive step the funding is wholly insufficient to meet the outstanding need for public oral health care.

People are still being told that the only option is to pull a tooth out – because the public system won't do root canal work to save the tooth. People are still enduring pain while they wait for a dental appointment, if they can make an appointment at all.

The cost to the community

An individual's oral health is vital for their overall health. There is increasing evidence that poor oral health is associated with many illnesses including diabetes, cancers, cardiovascular disease, and pre-term, low birthweight babies, and a range of other conditions.

Lack of public dental services is a growing problem for older people who are increasingly entering retirement with their own natural teeth rather than dentures.

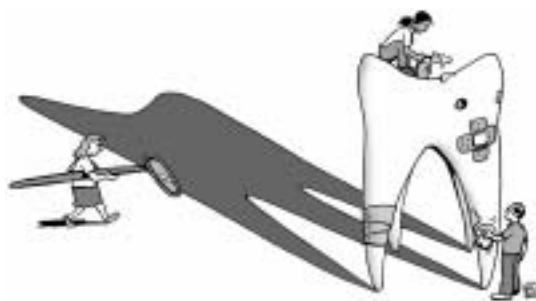
This is not only a public health issue. It is also an economic issue. Dental disease is a substantial burden not only for individuals but also for the community more broadly, costing millions of dollars in lost productivity, and adding to our health and welfare budgets. Where someone can't receive treatment in a reasonable time, minor problems become major problems, which are more expensive for the health system to treat. Investing in public dental services now will in fact save money in the long-term.

What needs to be done?

The Oral Health Alliance believes that NSW public dental services should be funded at a level adequate to meet service targets in relation to disadvantaged people.

These service targets are:

- That no NSW resident should have to wait more than 24 hours to receive emergency dental care
- That treatment should be available for decayed teeth and oral health diseases in time to prevent expensive, complicated dental care or tooth loss; and
- That regular dental check ups should be available.



What you can do

Ask your local candidates running in the 2003 NSW State Election the following questions:

1. What is your party's position on funding for public dental health care in NSW?
2. If you are elected, what will you do to extend public dental services to those who cannot get adequate treatment at present?
3. Do you agree that money invested in oral health care now will save on future expenditure in the health budget?
4. How will you put pressure on the Federal government to meet its responsibility to ensure dental services are provided for all Australians?

Please send details of your candidates' responses to:

Oral Health Alliance
C/- NCOSS
66 Albion Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010
Fax: 02 9281 1968

About the Oral Health Alliance

The Oral Health Alliance is a network of community organisations and individual health consumers concerned about public dental health care. The Alliance, formed in February 2001, is convened by the Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS).

This kit can be downloaded from the Oral Health Alliance website at
<http://teeth.8m.com/> and <http://www.ncoss.org.au/election2003>