

9 out of 10 want Medicare dental cover

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DENTAL health is a national disgrace and dentist bills should be covered under Medicare, the vast majority of Australians believe.

A Newspoll survey found many people endured chronic dental problems because they could not afford to get them fixed.

More than 90 per cent of the 1200 people surveyed said dentist bills should be treated no differently to other medical expenses and covered under Medicare.

Three-year-old Cooper Agius from western Sydney is the perfect example of why the system is failing.

The toddler needs new crowns and root treatment - but his parents have been told to sedate him for 12 months until he can get public emergency dental treatment.

His teeth have been eaten away to the nerves by the medication he is on for serious respiratory conditions.

The toddler was referred to a specialist at Westmead for diagnosis last Monday, who confirmed he needed emergency dental work.

But the family were then told it would be 12 months before that emergency work could be performed in the public system, Cooper's father Anthony Agius said.

Mr Agius said his son was in constant "excruciating pain".

"He's not happy, his whole personality has changed. He's a lot more aggressive, I presume because he's in so much pain," Mr Agius said.

"I'd like the Health Minister to come and spend a few nights a week at my place over 12 months and see what my boy is going through and what my whole family is going through because it affects us all.

"It's not an adequate emergency response by any definition," he said.

The Federal Government's decision to axe the Commonwealth Dental Scheme in 1996 has seen the public waiting list for dental treatment blow out to an estimated 650,000 people.

The Health Services Union, which commissioned the research, yesterday said it would push for emergency dental treatment to be subsidised.

Cosmetic procedures such as braces or capping would not be included under the proposal.

"It is a disgrace more is not being done to address the dental needs of Australians who cannot afford these services," HSU national secretary Craig Thomson said yesterday.

"Australia prides itself on its universal healthcare system and yet we have this huge gap in the services we provide.

"Having to wait years for treatment for painful tooth and gum problems is totally unacceptable," he said.

The scheme proposed by health unions would see children under the age of 18 and people over 65 given access to a Medicare rebate for dental care. The union is trying to pressure both the Labor Party and the Government to take up the campaign on behalf of those living with constant dental pain.

Dental health was one of former opposition leader Mark Latham's few popular policies but the question of who should pay for it has dropped off the national agenda.