

## SUPPORTING DENTAL PRO BONO PROGRAMS FOR LOW INCOME AUSTRALIANS



*Good dental health is essential for general health and well being and dental services should be a key component of a wellness-oriented health system. It is firmly established that poor dental health leads to poor general health including increased cardiovascular disease and stroke. Yet many Australians, particularly those on lower incomes, are not able to access basic dental care. There are more than 500,000 people on dental waiting lists with a national average wait for basic dental care taking 27 months. The Menzies Centre for Health Policy estimate dental problems cost Medicare around \$350million per year and result in around one million lost work days per year and costs the economy approximately \$2 billion in direct costs and lost productivity<sup>1</sup>.*

The Greens believe that everyone has the right to timely, high quality health care including dental care. That's why we are proposing the introduction of a universal, affordable dental health care scheme, Denticare.

The Greens also recognise the valuable role played by many dental professionals who voluntarily provide their services, practices and materials to help some of the many low income Australians who are missing out on dental care. The Dental Rescue Day run by the National Dental Foundation and the Filling the Gap program working in partnership with Wuchopperen Health Service in Cairns are two programs currently providing pro bono dental treatment. We believe that these programs and others like them should be supported to maximise their positive impact with increased funding for more effective co-ordination, communications and administration.

### The Greens will:

- Work with the National Dental Foundation to establish a co-ordinator in each state – with two in the larger states to administer roles – linking welfare service providers to the program, co-ordinating their participation, and ensuring continuity of support for clients.
- Provide additional administration and oral health co-ordinator resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dental programs such as Filling the Gap.
  - Co-ordinators could potentially be hosted through national social services networks.
  - Provide administrative funding \$800,000 per annum which could increase dental services up to an estimated 5,000 people per year.

<sup>1</sup> 'Dental and Oral Health Policy Paper by Professor Stephen Leeder and Dr Lesley Russell, Menzies Centre for Health Policy, September 2007)

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## Background

### *Co-ordination of pro bono dental care scheme for low income Australians*

The National Dental Foundation (NDF) is an independent dental industry-initiated organisation, which co-ordinates pro bono work by the Australian dental health professionals. For the past five years, the NDF has worked with over 40 charitable and welfare organisations to co-ordinate free access to dental care on selected days for hundreds of the most disadvantaged people in Australian communities. The program, Dental Rescue Day, provides an immediate means to deliver the stated priority of the Health Commission Report to reach those disadvantaged Australians who are least likely to be able to readily access existing dental health services.

Under the scheme, dentists provide basic dental care and devise a dental health treatment plan for each client. The treatment plan is directed to encouraging patients to improve their dental health to move beyond emergency procedures towards primary dental care and to register with public health service. In *Dental Rescue Day* activity in August 2009, the National Dental Foundation arranged access dental services for 501 patients. The treatment and access to services and equipment was estimated to be worth around \$520,000.

## Filling the Gap

*Filling the Gap* is a not-for-profit volunteer organisation which grew out of the urgent need to reduce the chronic wait for dental treatment experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities which have a higher percentage of people with compromised, chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and rheumatic fever, than in an average metropolitan, mainstream dental practice. Filling the Gap currently works in partnership with Wuchopperen Health Service in Cairns. It recruits dentists, and occasionally hygienists, to volunteer for a week or more at the health service. The service began in January 2006 with 2 volunteers and since then has had over 125 dentists plus a number of hygienists who have provided over 6,000 episodes of care.

The program started in order to meet a crisis at Wuchopperen Health Service, a community controlled Aboriginal Health Service. It could not recruit permanent dentists able to provide a full time service. Wuchopperen has a purpose-built, modern centre with two fully

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equipped dental clinics, a similarly well-equipped mobile dental van, and facilities for a dental technician. The program provides a wide range of dentistry, including preventative, restorative, prosthetic, endodontics and minor oral surgery, X-rays and referrals.

### ***The role of the new co-ordinators***

New funding would enable the provision of a co-ordinator in each state – with two in the larger states - to consolidate and build the work of this voluntary program. These co-ordinators would take an administrative role – linking social service providers to the program, co-ordinating their participation, and ensuring continuity of support for clients.

Co-ordinators could be hosted through existing national social services networks such as Anglicare or the ACOSS network across the country. Based in these organisations, co-ordinators could make immediate use of the strong connections these organisations already established with other organisations, including health and dental service providers. State co-ordinators would work with welfare service providers to support clients attending their appointment (recognising the difficulties that many clients would have in getting to a scheduled appointment due to housing, transport or other issues), and would ensure that case workers follow-up clients' dental health plans into the future.

This co-ordination would maximise the benefit of the donated time and expertise of dentists and increase the number of clients able to access this free service. It would help to reduce the demand on public health services and prevent oral health problems developing into more serious illnesses that may require hospitalisation. It would also ensure that the administration appointments are organised to allow the pro bono time of the dentist to be used productively for dentistry. By co-ordinators fulfilling the administrative functions of the program to maximum efficiency, the retention of volunteer dentists and the capacity to attract new dentists to the scheme will be increased. Co-ordinators would potentially increase the participation of dentists and dental assistants by fifty per cent.

### ***Funding the co-ordinator positions in each state would dramatically increase the scope of the program.***

This investment would enable the program to potentially provide dental services for up to 5000 people per year. Currently, about 500 people throughout the country access the program on each Dental Rescue day.