



COTA Over 50s MEDIA RELEASE
PO Box 3508
MANUKA ACT 2603

Phone: 02 6295 1844
Fax: 02 6295 1807
Email: info@cotaover50s.org.au

Dental health reform needs bite not bickering

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COTA Over 50s has long called for improvements in dental and oral health care. The current spat over Medicare benefits for chronically ill patients suffering dental disease must not be allowed to distract the government from delivering much-needed improvements to the availability of dental services to all Australians.

“For older Australians, dental health is a fundamental element of wellbeing. Sadly, many are suffering unnecessary pain and deteriorating oral health not only because of a shortage of dentists, but because of unhelpful professional arrangements about how dental hygienists and therapists can offer oral health services,” said Executive Director, Dr Geoffrey Bird.

“We commissioned a major economic analysis of the impact of poor dental health, because gum disease and the like is linked to a range of serious health conditions such as coronary heart disease, stroke, peripheral vascular disease and pancreatic cancer with corresponding costs around \$420 million per year. That is substantially higher than the direct annual cost of dental healthcare itself. Preventative oral health would save tens of millions of dollars.

“Dental hygienists and therapists are a key provider of dental care for older Australians. In most states they are restricted in their scope of practice because of the way their professional relationships to dentists are structured. A wider scope of practice would allow therapists and hygienists to treat older Australians in a range of different settings, such as community centres, residential care or even private homes. There should be a national registration of hygienists and therapists that allows this to happen. Tasmania has a very good model that could be followed nationally.

“There are not sufficient data about the existing Medicare dental rebate scheme to enable an easy judgment of its effectiveness. Clearly people who are chronically ill and have associated dental disease should have ready and regular access to treatment. So too should pensioners, and there are far too many of them on dental waiting lists. Some of them have been waiting for ten years. It will be a serious blow to pensioners if the government’s proposed Dental Health Program is suspended.”

For further information contact

Dr Geoffrey Bird Mobile 0409 705 951

From
Geoffrey Bird <gbird@cotaover50s.org.au>
To "Macklin, Jennifer (MP)" <JMacklin.MP@aph.gov.au>, Nicola.Roxon.MP@aph.gov.au, Justine.Elliot.MP@aph.gov.au

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Good afternoon Ministers

Yesterday's Senate result certainly has unfortunate implications for progress on the public dental health reform front. Obviously we have been keen to see a reduction in numbers on the public dental waiting list and your CDHP looked set to deliver some important improvements, especially for older disadvantaged Australians. The Senate's refusal to rescind its resolution of the 19th June puts the Government in a invidious position. We acknowledge that the Government made its intentions clear prior to its election. It is a pity that the implementation of the CDHP looks set to be suspended.

The attached press release highlights an aspect of dental health reform that we believe will deliver substantial oral health benefits to older Australians whatever the fate of the CDHP.

Best Regards

Geoffrey

Dr Geoffrey Bird
Executive Director
COTA Over 50s Ltd.
National Office
PO Box 3508
Manuka ACT 2603

Phone: 02 6295 1844
Fax: 02 6295 1807
Mobile: 0409 705 951
<http://www.cotaover50s.org.au>