



the voice of older Australians

COTA Over 50s Ltd.

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Mr. Bob McMullan
Member for Fraser
Unit 8/1
Torrens Street
Braddon ACT 2612

National Dental Health Program for Older Australians

Dear Mr. McMullan

COTA Over 50s is Australia's leading seniors' organisation that protects and promotes the well-being of all older Australians, through our individual members and seniors organisations in all states and territories.

In September this year COTA Over 50s, in conjunction with the Australia Dental Industry Association, released a report by respected economic modeler Econtech titled, "Economic Analysis of Dental Health for Older Australians". The report noted that periodontal (gum) disease is linked to a range of serious health conditions, including: coronary heart diseases, stroke, peripheral vascular disease and pancreatic cancer with elderly Australians showing double the rates of periodontal disease than younger people. The report concluded that the Government could save \$42 million a year on dental and costs associated with related ill-health in the elderly if it extended the dental entitlements of the Department of Veteran's Affairs Gold Card holders to all Aged Pension Card holders over 65 years of age.

Dental Hygienists and Therapists are a key provider of dental care for older Australians. However the ability to deliver their full range of care differs from jurisdiction to jurisdiction due to restrictions on how they can practice, including restrictive supervision (Hygienists) and age limitations on patients (Therapists).

For instance, in Tasmania, Therapists and Hygienists are able to “work within the scope of training, acquired skills and competence”. In New South Wales, Therapists are confined to working only in the public sector with patients up to the age of 18, while Hygienists, are able to work in both the private and public sectors on all ages, but only under the direct supervision of a dentist. Direct supervision means that the Dentist must be physically on the premises while the Hygienist is working.

The ability of a Hygienist to work in age care facilities is considerably restricted under “direct supervision” as their access to patients can only occur when a Dentist is physically present. A restriction deemed unnecessary in Tasmania.

What Hygienists and Therapists can and cannot do is defined as their Scope of Practice and is legislated through their state dental boards. The Council of Australian Governments has agreed to try and diminish the inconsistencies in Scope of Practice through National Registration. We understand all jurisdictions will be required to have exactly the same Scope of Practice for each dental health professional.

COTA Over 50s is concerned that if the Scope of Practice for Hygienists and Therapists is set at the level in the most restrictive jurisdiction many older Australians, and those in residential aged care, will be deprived of essential dental care.

We understand that Hygienists and Therapists are not seeking to practice independently of dentists but to be able to provide direct access to care for patients while still working as part of a dental team. Safety to the public would be ensured through a collaborative approach that utilises the expertise of onsite health professionals, i.e. medical doctors, registered nurses, nurse practitioners, etc. as well as consultation with and referral to dentists where required .

COTA Over 50s supports this concept and requests that in the interests of better dental care the national registration of Hygienists and Therapists should include the widest Scope of Practice such as that currently allowed in Tasmania.

As the Econtech report demonstrates older Australians are suffering major health problems as a result of poor dental care. Increasing their access to dental health professionals will produce considerable health benefits and save Governments related healthcare expenses.

COTA Over 50s strongly urges you to support the Tasmanian model for registration of Hygienists and Therapists, as we believe this will provide the best access to high quality dental care.

Sincerely

Dr Geoffrey Bird (PhD)
Executive Director