

INQUIRY INTO DENTAL SERVICES IN NSW

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Theme:

Summary

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The Standing Committee on social issues
Legislative Council, NSW Parliament
Macquarie St, NSW 2000

RE: The inquiry by the Standing Committee on social issues into dental health

Dear Sir/Madam

As the Executive Director of the St George Division of General Practice and the spokesperson for the St George Division's 300 members, I would like to share some of our concerns with you. Our members have long been concerned about the degrading state of the dental health service and education. We would welcome an inquiry from the Upper House into this neglected area of health care.

In my capacity as a Division's Board Member and as a local GP, my colleagues and I are aware of many people who suffer significant pain and disability from poor dental health. We are dismayed by the lack of adequate services to relieve their pain and restore their lives to normal function.

Tooth ache is not only intensely painful, but also prevents consumption of a normal diet which is essential for good health, as does the lack of proper dentures for those missing teeth. Also, in a society where personal appearance is considered important, badly degraded teeth cause great psychological pain for many. We understand that there are further links between general and dental health, so that poor dental health is making our community sicker in more ways than one.

It is particularly worrying that there is an increase in the extent of untreated dental disease, this in part reflects a shortage of trained dental clinicians, with significant shortfalls predicted by 2010. The workforce shortage appears to be due to a lack of sufficient training positions for dentists, as well as dental therapists, hygienists, technicians and prosthetists. Despite the fact that there are many young people who would love to enter these professions, and the significant community need, the necessary training positions have not been created. Educational staff in the training institutions are working in difficult circumstances, and we are worried that if this is not reversed the dental workforce will be further degraded.

We recognize that public dental services are patchy, with some areas receiving comparatively good care and most of the eligible population unable to access routine dental care, in a reasonable time in metropolitan areas due to dental shortages. There is a concern that people living in rural areas are often unable to find a dentist, despite being able to pay for the service.



The lack of adequate preventive dental programs and insufficient fluoridation are of great concern, as prevention of disease seems even more important in the absence of enough dental clinicians to treat existing dental disease.

Finally, our concern is that despite there being many internal and external reports of these problems to both State and Federal governments, including a Senate Inquiry in 1998, very little seems to have been done to prevent the current and developing dental crisis. It is of note that despite an increase of about one billion dollars for NSW Health in the recent budget, no new funding for dental health has been allocated.

We hope that the current inquiry results in positive action being taken to address these concerns, and expect the State Government to accept its responsibility for ensuring adequate dental health, services and education for NSW.

Yours Sincerely



Dr Klaus Stelter
Executive Director

