



Australian Health Care Reform Alliance

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MEDIA RELEASE

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At last! A great kick start towards a fairer dental system

“Today’s announcement by Health Minister Tanya Plibersek, alongside Richard Di Natale from the Greens, is the first but very significant and welcome step towards a fairer and more rational, national dental system for Australians,” said Tony McBride, Chair of the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance (AHCRA).

“AHCRA welcomes this on several grounds,” said Mr McBride. “First, it is a very significant initiative addressing one of the Cinderella areas of health. There are some significant inequalities in access to health care across Australia and access to dental care is one of them. Low income people can currently wait up to 3 years for basic treatment so this package targets those with the greatest need,” Mr McBride added. “Although the Medicare Chronic Disease Program is to be phased out it did do some good work. However it was not as well targeted as it should have been, and as a result many with a greater need missed out.”

It is understood that the new funding will go to about 67% of Australian children least able to afford private dental care, and the adult funding will be directed to the 30% of adults with the lowest incomes. There is money to create more facilities in outer urban and regional areas too – again where there is the greatest current need. So overall the package will start to create a fairer dental system, where currently there is no real ‘system’.

Second, the new scheme’s focus on children (where two-thirds of children will be eligible) builds better oral health for this future generation. The new Commonwealth funding will enable the States therefore to redirect their child dental funding to adult services in their states and receive extra Commonwealth funding on top of that, so they will have strong capacity to expand public dental services and hopefully eliminate current unconscionably long public waiting lists.

Third, the package moves towards a nationally consistent and rational system with the Commonwealth taking responsibility for children’s dental services, and the States for adults (with some significant Commonwealth financial support). So it greatly clarifies responsibilities between the levels of governments: from AHCRA’s point of view a good reform.

“Lastly and importantly”, Mr McBride concluded, “it creates the building blocks for a future universal system. Although the government did not announce such a commitment, the package starts to put in place the necessary foundations, as recommended by the recent National Advisory Council on Dental Health.”

AHCRA congratulates the Minister, Tanya Plibersek, for leading her colleagues (in a constrained financial environment) to back such a significant move towards equity. Equally significant was the role of Richard Di Natale from the Greens who negotiated this package with the Minister and has shown great commitment to the dental needs of ordinary Australians.

** AHCRA advocates for a fairer health system. It is a coalition of about 30 national and state peak health groups, including those representing the medical profession, nursing, allied health, the rural health sector, as well as consumer groups.*

Tony McBride is available for interview on mobile 0407 531 468