



## Election Media Release

13 August 2013

### Dental care - a priority issue for many Australians

A group of eight key health organisations has today called on the Coalition to match or improve upon the Labor Party's commitment to children's dental services under Medicare and increased funding for public dental services for adults. Whoever wins government, the money allocated to the Grow Up Smiling (GUS) program and to better services for the 30% of adults with the lowest incomes must be guaranteed.

The incoming government must also make it plain to the States and Territories that the extra Commonwealth resources will only flow to jurisdictions which retain their existing level of public dental health service, including school dental programs.

"The arrangements agreed last August do not require the States and Territories to *increase* their effort," said Tony McBride, Chair of the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance. "But if the jurisdictions reduce their allocations to dental services, a critical and equitable solution to a very serious problem will be subverted."

The eight groups making today's call are the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance, the National Rural Health Alliance, Public Health Association of Australia, Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association, the Australian Council of Social Service, Australian Dental Association, The Australian Dental and Oral Health Therapists' Association and the Dental Hygienists' Association of Australia.

"For a long time this has been a weak link in the Australian health system, with many Australians, especially the disadvantaged, unable to access timely dental care," said Julie Barker, President of ADOHTA. "In a country as wealthy as Australia everyone should be able to access dental care. The promised package will help overcome access blocks due to both cost and local availability."

The new package directs funding towards about 67% of all Australian children (in those families less able to afford private care) and to those 30% of adults with the lowest incomes. There is also funding to try to secure a better distribution of dental health professionals across the country. The additional resources will significantly improve access to dental care for those most in need and reduce the demand on public hospitals for acute care caused by untreated dental problems.

"We are writing to the major parties to remind them that Australia's dental status for adults is one of the lowest in the OECD, and consumers pay on average 60 cents in the dollar of costs," said Gordon Gregory of the NRHA. "We will seek confirmation of the parties' positions on the new programs and issue a further media release later to share their responses".

Building on the existing programs is essential and the unnecessary restrictions on the type of services delivered under GUS has to be lifted so these children are put on a proper path for dental health.

As well as significantly improving care, stronger action is required to prevent dental ill-health. The National Oral Health Promotion Plan presented to the Government in April should be released and become the basis for a stronger focus on preventive work.

"Fluoridation is widely accepted as the most cost-effective public health preventive measures and is backed by a wealth of peer-reviewed scientific evidence. Around 20% of Australians adults and children do not have automatic access to fluoridated water and the Queensland Government has recently gone into reverse, allowing local Councils to cease fluoridation," said Dr Karin Alexander, ADA President.

"The lack of a national approach on this is a key threat to Australia's dental health. Parties need to commit to strong action to require the States to continue to roll out fluoridation to deliver oral health benefits to all Australians," added Alison Verhoeven, Chief Executive of the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association.

**Contacts:** Tony McBride, Chair, Australian Health Care Reform Alliance: 0407 531 468  
Alison Verhoeven, CEO, Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association: 0403 282 501  
Fernando de Freitas, Media and Comms Coordinator, ACOSS: 0419 626 155  
Karin Alexander, President, ADA: 02 9906 4412  
Julie Barker, President, ADOHTA: 0422 416 391