



“This situation is quite simply an outrage”

KATE ELLIS ON THE CRISIS IN PUBLIC DENTAL HEALTH

MORE than half a million Australians are being forced to wait up to five years to get their teeth fixed in what is, simply, a national outrage.

While public dental health may not be the biggest headline-grabbing topic in Australian politics, the Howard Government's abandonment of the system has created horror stories that must be told.

About 650,000 Australians have a whole lot to complain about but poor dental health sees many of them barely able to speak or too embarrassed to do so.

But their stories must be heard and the Federal Government must act now.

Those on the long public dental care waiting list are the victims of the Government's decision to dispose of the Commonwealth Dental Health Program.

When the Howard Government abolished the program in 1996, there were 380,000 Australians waiting an average of six months for public dental care.

I was contacted recently by a constituent who is unemployed and missing several teeth.

This man desperately wants to work and believes his dental problem creates a bad impression at job interviews and, at the very least, affects his self-confidence.

He does not have the \$5000 he has been told he needs for a private dentist to fix his teeth and he has now been on the queue to see a public dentist for more than 18 months.

He is unlikely to reach the front of the queue for another year.

Similarly, I have met pensioners who are either in need of dentures or desperately need to have existing dentures refitted.

They reveal they feel forgotten

and neglected – struggling to eat or speak while they wait on ridiculously long lists.

Many have been forced to stop eating proper foods, including fruit and vegetables, because they find it too painful to chew.

One woman was in such dire need of a denture refitting that she cried in embarrassment as her dentures fell out while telling me her story.

The provision of dental services is one of the basic services of a civilised society.

In a country as prosperous as ours, we must do better than to abandon the elderly and the disadvantaged in such cruel fashion.

Poor oral health and associated poor nutrition can lead to broad-ranging and serious consequences.

Pain along with conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, discrimination and embarrassment can be the result.

Since the abolition of the dental health program in 1996, state and territory governments have been left to bridge the dental program's gaps, leading to mixed results.

Under the previous Liberal government in SA the average waiting time for public dental health care reached 49 months in 2001. Imagine the outrage at being told you had to wait more than four years to have your teeth fixed.

The Rann Government recognised that dental health care can seriously affect people's quality of life and it has massively invested in dental health.

It has also injected \$18.5 million into public dental health programs and has managed to reduce waiting lists by 22 months – a 40 per cent reduction in time spent on waiting lists compared to when the Liberals were in government.

Despite South Australians now faring a lot better than many of our state counterparts, two years is still just too long for people to wait.

Section 51 of the Constitution gives the Federal Government responsibility for dental health. The time for the Howard Government to stop shirking its responsibility and start investing in Australia's dental health care is long overdue.

I, and the Labor Party, will continue to fight for the Howard Government to meet its responsibility in this area.

My colleague in Hindmarsh, Steve Georganas, has moved a motion in the Federal Parliament on this issue and we are both distributing petitions which will be presented to the Parliament to demand genuine action.

We need a national public dental system and we need a strategy to address the critical shortage of dentists and therapists.

We need the Liberal Party to recognise that dental health treatment is an essential element of our overall health system and must be accessible to all Australians.

It is these basic issues which are continuing to damage the lives of those in our communities and on which the Government must take action.

It is time for the horror stories to end.

Australia must use its prosperity to help people get basic dental health care.

Kate Ellis is the federal Labor member for Adelaide