

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### Terms of reference

1.1 This matter was referred to the Committee on 29 October 1997 for inquiry and report by 30 April 1998. The reporting date was later extended to 28 May 1998.

1.2 The complete terms of reference for the inquiry are:

Current arrangements for the provision of public dental services in Australia, with particular reference to:

- (a) the current and future dental care needs of low income earners and other disadvantaged groups of Australians and the capacity of both private and public dental services to meet those needs;
- (b) the effect of the abolition of the Commonwealth Dental Health Program;
- (c) the nature of the Commonwealth's responsibility to make laws for the provision of dental services pursuant to section 51(xxiiiA) of the Australian Constitution and the extent to which the Commonwealth is currently fulfilling that responsibility;
- (d) the Commonwealth's role and responsibility in setting and monitoring national goals for oral health in Australia; and
- (e) options for reform in the delivery of public dental services, including an exploration of the efficiency and effectiveness of a range of options for delivering dental services to low income earners.

### Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 The inquiry was advertised in *The Weekend Australian* on 15-16 November 1997, and through the Internet. Submissions were also invited from government, community and other groups and individuals involved with the provision of public dental services in Australia. The closing date for submissions was originally 3 February 1998, although the Committee continued to receive submissions throughout the course of the inquiry.

1.4 Prior to the lodgement of submissions, Dental Health Services Victoria convened a national seminar on the role of the Commonwealth in the provision of dental services for the disadvantaged. The aim of the seminar was to consider the findings of research on the dental care needs of the disadvantaged, exchange views on the key policy issues, and to work to agree on national policy positions that could be submitted to the Senate inquiry. The seminar, held on 16 January 1998, was attended by over 100 participants from 54 separate groups, including dental health and

community services, public health officials from many parts of Australia, relevant interest groups and research academics. A communique of the agreed outcomes of the national seminar was agreed to by the participants and released at the conclusion of the seminar.<sup>1</sup>

1.5 The Committee received 137 submissions indicating the high level of interest in the subject. Many of the submissions endorsed the policy propositions contained in the communique from the national seminar. Some of the submissions were in the form of letters from individuals and case studies documenting the hardships faced by disadvantaged members of the community in accessing dental services. Appendix 1 contains a list of submissions made to this inquiry.

1.6 The Committee held two days of public hearings in Canberra on 6 and 23 March 1998. Witnesses who gave evidence at the public hearings are listed in Appendix 2. Additional information was tabled at the hearings and provided to the Committee following the hearings in answer to questions taken on notice. This information is also listed in Appendix 1.

1.7 The Committee expresses its appreciation to all those people who made submissions, provided additional material and information, or gave evidence to the inquiry.

### **Background to the inquiry**

1.8 The reference of this matter to the Committee resulted primarily from the cessation of the Commonwealth Dental Health Program (CDHP) from 1 January 1997. The CDHP was established in 1994 in response to the National Health Strategy's Background Paper *Improving Dental Health in Australia* (1992) and concentrated on providing measures to improve access to dental services for disadvantaged Australians. The Commonwealth ceased funding for the CDHP as a result of decisions taken in the 1996 budget context. The cessation of the Program was the subject of considerable debate in the Senate at the time and during the 1996-97 Budget estimates hearings of the Community Affairs Legislation Committee. From 1 January 1997, the States and Territories resumed full responsibility for public dentistry.

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1 Submission No.67, pp.3-5. The Communique released by the National Seminar is at Appendix 1 to this submission.