

24 August 2007



Elton Humphery  
Committee Secretary  
Community Affairs Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia

Dear Mr Humphery

### **Health Insurance Amendment (Medicare Dental Services) Bill 2007**

The Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) supports the amendments to the Health Insurance Act 1973 to increase access to dental treatment under Medicare for people with chronic conditions and complex care needs.

AGPN is the peak body representing 119 divisions of general practice and eight state-based organisations (SBOs). Approximately 95% of GPs are members of a local division.

There is considerable evidence that those with chronic diseases often have many co-occurring complex conditions such as oral health issues. There is also evidence to suggest that the incidence of chronic and complex disease is higher in those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This measure will provide those patients with much needed improved access to subsidised dental treatment delivered through the private sector.

We believe that the referral pathway via the Medicare GP Management Plan and Team Care Arrangements is an appropriate starting point. We would, however, support broader access to Medicare benefits for dental treatment for people on low income thresholds and health care card holders.

AGPN notes that the bill provides for a limit of \$4,250 over two calendar years. This is an improvement to the arrangements in the Budget which provided for patients to receive a diagnostic consultation and maximum of \$2,000 in Medicare benefits for dental treatment each year because it recognises that major dental treatment is often required in a series of 'up front' interventions, rather than a series of treatments over a period of time.

We are concerned that these arrangements will be inequitable and only benefit those in communities well served by dentists in private practice. There are only about 9000 practising dentists in Australia. The vast majority of these work in either central business districts or middle class residential suburbs of major population centres<sup>1</sup>. AGPN has strongly suggests that consideration be given to how existing schemes that support patient access such as the




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Medical Outreach Specialist Program (MSOAP) and the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme could accommodate access to dental treatment services.

Uptake of the forerunner items introduced in 2004 Enhanced Primary Care arrangements whereby eligible patients could access up to three dental services per year (with a Medicare rebate on \$77.95 per service) has been modest. In 2006-07, there were just over 3,300 referrals for dental assessment (item 10975) and these resulted in just over 4,400 items of treatment or referral to a dental specialist (items 10976, 10977).<sup>ii</sup> AGPN would recommend a communication strategy to bring together local networks of GPs and dentists to raise awareness of the new items and provide an orientation to their use.

Please contact Leanne Wells on (02) 62280854 or [lwells@agpn.com.au](mailto:lwells@agpn.com.au) if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

(approved for email transmission)

**Kate Carnell AO**  
**Chief Executive Officer**

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<sup>i</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Labour force – dentists. 2005. Available at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/labourforce/dentists.cfm>

<sup>ii</sup> Medicare Australia. Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items statistics report. Available at: [http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au/statistics/dyn\\_mbs/forms/mbs\\_tab4.shtml](http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au/statistics/dyn_mbs/forms/mbs_tab4.shtml)