

Federal government will face pressure to add dental to Medicare, amid 'overwhelming' wait times



By Fiona Willan

Dental Care

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Don Batty says he is very embarrassed by his teeth. He cannot afford to see a private dentist. (ABC News: Nathan Morris)

In short:

Data shows that patients are waiting months, if not years, for dental care in every Australian state and territory.

Two million Australians are skipping or delaying dental care due to the cost.

What's next?

The Greens now hold the sole balance of power in the Senate and say they will use it to pressure the federal government to add dental to Medicare.

Queensland pensioner Don Batty has always looked after his teeth, but age has taken its toll.

These days, the former NSW Police officer finds it hard to look in the mirror.

"I'm 80 years old now and my teeth have started to disintegrate," he told the ABC.

"I'm very embarrassed by my teeth and I try not to smile because I frighten people."

The Toowoomba resident is missing multiple molars, which makes it hard to chew food.

His dental issues affect his diet, speech and confidence.



The Queensland pensioner has been waiting for public dental care for nearly two years. (ABC News: Nathan Morris)

He has been living like this for nearly two years because he cannot afford to visit a private dentist.

"It would be totally impossible.

"There is no way I can save enough money to spend the thousands that are required to go to a private dentist."

Mr Batty is among 140,000 Queenslanders waiting for non-urgent public dental care.

More than 10,000 patients have been added to the queue in the past year.

"I've been waiting now for about 21 months," Mr Batty said.

"We've got a very, very good dental service, but it's overwhelmed. There's no way they can deal with the number of people in this city and surrounding towns with the resources they've got."



Mr Batty is among 140,000 people in Queensland waiting for non-urgent public dental care. *(ABC News: Nathan Morris)*

A national issue

Data obtained by the ABC shows patients in every state and territory can expect to wait months, if not years, for non-urgent public dental care.

Around one-third of Australians are eligible for the free or low-cost public dental services, which are delivered by state and territory governments with some funding from the Commonwealth.

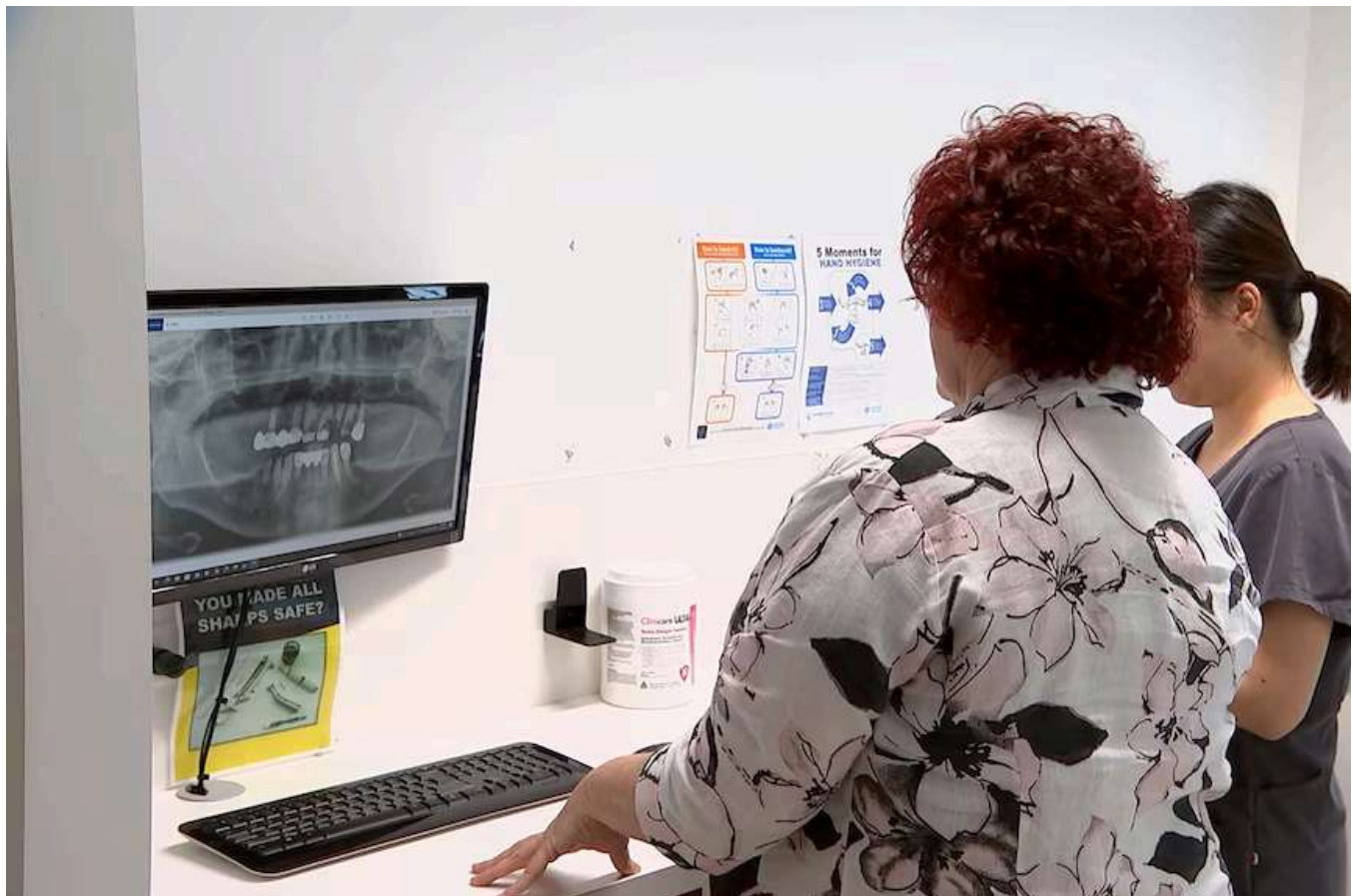
There are variations in how states and territories record and report their data, but the figures are similar.

Queensland Health says it is "desirable" to provide a patient with general dental care within two years.

In New South Wales, the "maximum recommended waiting time" for patients seeking non-urgent routine care is around 18 months.

The Victorian Health Department said the average wait for the state's non-urgent public dental services was 12.4 months.

The most recent data available shows the longest wait times were in Tasmania and the Northern Territory.



Tasmania and the Northern Territory have the longest waiting times for dental care. (ABC News)

In Tasmania, 50 per cent of patients removed from the waitlist in the past 12 months had been there for more than 2.5 years.

In the NT, the median wait time for a first appointment from 2023 to 2024 was also around 2.5 years, according to data compiled by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).

The AIHW also found about 10 per cent of patients in Tasmania and the NT waited nearly five years for their first appointment.

The shortest waiting times were in Western Australia, where last year patients received non-urgent care after an average of 5.4 months.

In South Australia, the average wait was seven months.

No average or median wait list data was available for the ACT.

Each state and territory government told the ABC that patients in priority groups or those requiring urgent care did not have to wait for treatment.

Australian Dental Association president Chris Sanzaro said the issue was adding pressure to other parts of the health system.

"Around Australia there's nearly 90,000 potentially preventable hospitalisations each year due to dental disease.

"There's a lot of links between poor dental health and overall health. The one link we know is very strong is between diabetes and poor dental health."



Peter Breadon from the Grattan Institute says the system is overwhelmed. *(Supplied: Billy Draper)*

Grattan Institute health program director Peter Breadon said the public dental system was underfunded and "overwhelmed".

"Of all the funding that goes into dental care in Australia, about 60 per cent comes out of the pockets of patients, in the form of fees," he said.

"To put that in perspective ... it's nine times the share that comes from patients when you see a GP."

The Greens push to add dental to Medicare

As the new federal parliament prepares to begin its work this week, the Greens are vowing to ramp up pressure on the government to add dental to Medicare.

Despite being nearly wiped out in the lower house at the federal election, the minor party is returning to Canberra with the sole balance of power in the Senate.

This means the government will rely entirely on its support to pass legislation when the Coalition is not on board.

Greens Health spokesperson Jordon Steele-John said he would be "pulling every lever as an MP" to get dental added to Medicare.

"We are excited and energised as a party to get to work," Mr Steele-John said.



The Greens Jordon Steele-John says he will be pulling all levers to get dental added to Medicare. (ABC News: Tahlia Davis)

When asked if the Greens would refuse to back bills if the government didn't agree to add dental to Medicare, he did not rule it out.

"There may well be moments where there is an opportunity to raise the issue in the course of the passage of a debate or in the course of a passage of a piece of legislation," he said.

But he added his "starting point" would be to work with people across parliament to create a consensus on the issue.

Mr Steele-John described the beginning of the new parliamentary term as "an opportunity to strike a new tone".

"To signal clearly you are willing and excited to work with people of goodwill to get something done for the community," he said.

The Greens have previously indicated they will take a less hardline approach in the upcoming parliament, after losing three lower house MPs at the federal election, including then-leader Adam Bandt.

In the previous term, the party used its senate numbers to block a bill designed to ease the housing crisis, as it pushed for more rights for renters.

New leader Larissa Waters said the Greens wanted to be "firm but constructive" in the new term.

The minor party campaigned heavily on the issue of adding dental to Medicare ahead of the election, and was encouraged by comments previously made by Health Minister Mark Butler.

Mr Butler told the ABC in March: "Our party would love to bring dental into Medicare at some stage. We've got that as part of our platform commitment."

When pressed over the possible timing this week, Mr Butler said in a statement the government's immediate focus was on strengthening Medicare and rebuilding general practice.

"I can't say to people that in the short term there's going to be any change to dental," he said.

"But I do recognise in the longer term there's a lot of ambition for dental to be covered by Medicare."

The federal government has previously indicated it cannot yet add dental to Medicare due to the cost.

A staged approach

Policy experts and dentists argue dental services could be added to Medicare in stages, to keep costs down.

The Australian Dental Association claims the first step should be a Medicare-funded dental scheme for seniors.

"It would be somewhere between \$1.1 billion and \$1.4 billion a year," Dr Sanzaro said.

"A means-tested scheme, with a capped amount available to every individual every couple of years."



Chris Sanzaro says a Medicare-funded dental scheme for seniors would cost up to \$1.4 billion a year. *(Supplied)*

The Grattan Institute estimates it would cost \$8 billion a year to gradually add dental services into the Medicare scheme over a decade.

"Obviously you can't just turn on a switch and put that much money into the system," Mr Breadon said.

"We suggest you start by phasing in disadvantaged people, you expand to their families, and then you might

add age groups like children or older people."

Some children are already eligible for free or low-cost dental through the Child Dental Benefits Schedule under Medicare.

Around 3.5 million children have received treatment through the scheme since it started in 2014.

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