



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**DENTAL BENEFITS BILL 2008**

**DENTAL BENEFITS (CONSEQUENTIAL  
AMENDMENTS) BILL 2008**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 18 June 2008**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Polley, Sen Helen

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**Senator POLLEY** (Tasmania) (12.23 pm)—I rise in the Senate today to speak in support of the Dental Benefits Bill 2008 and the Dental Benefits (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2008. We Tasmanians know only too well that there is a shortage of dentists around the country, particularly in rural and regional areas. In my home town of Launceston we are facing the rapidly declining availability of dentists due to retirement—including my own dentist, who I keep encouraging to continue. The Rudd Labor government understands that seeing a dentist is simply out of the budget for many Australian working families, and that is why the Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, and Ms Nicola Roxon, Minister for Health and Ageing, announced the Teen Dental Plan as a key election commitment.

We understand that good oral health is not simply the absence of oral disease but a state of wellbeing in which an individual can eat, speak and socialise without discomfort or embarrassment. Poor oral health has a range of consequences, including pain, difficulty in eating certain foods, impaired speech, loss of self-esteem, restriction of social and community participation, and the impeding of the ability to gain employment. Generally a person's overall quality of life is affected.

Poor oral health is also associated with an increased risk of cardiac problems, pre-term and/or low-birth-weight infants and poor diabetic control. The statistics are shocking: some 50,000 Australian people end up in hospital each year with preventable dental conditions, 25.5 per cent of the Australian adult population have untreated dental decay, and 17.4 per cent of the Australian population aged 15 and above were unable to eat certain foods because of problems with their teeth during the last 12 months. It is hard to believe that this is happening in our country. A 2007 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report concluded:

Thirty per cent of Australians reported avoiding dental care due to cost, 20.6% said that cost had prevented them from having recommended dental treatment and 18.2% reported that they would have a lot of difficulty paying a \$100 dental bill.

This is simply not good enough.

Rather than taking any responsibility, the previous coalition government passed the buck. They shifted

blame. They blamed the states. They simply did not care. As usual, as I said, they passed the buck, with their arrogance. The proof was there that they were completely out of touch with the Australian community. It was in fact the Howard government that helped create some of these problems in the first place. For over a decade the Howard government did absolutely nothing about ensuring that the future needs of the dental profession would be met by our universities. As many of those sitting opposite me would remember, one of the first acts of their government was to scrap the previous Labor government's Commonwealth Dental Health Program, ripping \$100 million a year from the public dental system. This led to the explosion in public dental waiting lists that we see today.

The former health minister, Mr Abbott, claimed that the dental care in this country was 'in crisis' but did nothing about it. Mr Hockey said in the other place just last night that the coalition 'understands the burden of dental disease in our society'. If this was truly the case, why was the Labor government left to deal with some 650,000 Australians on public waiting lists? The former Howard government's dental policy was a failed scheme and very poorly targeted. Under their policy, if you had a chronic medical condition, certain heart disease, diabetes or malignancies of the head or neck, you had poor oral health or a dental condition which was exacerbating a chronic and complex disease, and you were being treated under a multidisciplinary care plan, then, and only then, were you eligible for assistance with your dental care.

The impact of the Howard government's neglect is a very real problem facing too many Australians today. Narrow eligibility is one reason why only 7,000 people had received assistance from the program over the last three years. In my home state of Tasmania, over a period of four years, only eight people up to the age of 24 had received the chronic disease dental service—only eight. That is an average of two people a year. This is simply not good enough; Australians deserve better. This policy of theirs was another example of how out of touch they became after 12 long years in government.

I am very proud to say that the Rudd Labor government is committed to stopping the blame game. Our Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, has assured the Australian people that the buck will stop with him, and

he means it. He has hit the ground running. During the 2007 election, Labor promised to provide funding to establish two new dental programs: a Commonwealth dental health scheme and the Teen Dental Plan. The Rudd Labor government's Teen Dental Plan, I am pleased to say, will assist one million Australian teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 with their dental costs. The Rudd Labor government understands that Australian working families are already under financial pressure due to mortgages, childcare costs, grocery prices, petrol prices and the inflationary pressures that we have inherited from the former Liberal coalition government. They are being forced to make stark choices between dental treatment and other day-to-day necessities. The Teen Dental Plan proposes that eligible teenagers would be issued with vouchers by Medicare Australia which would entitle them to receive a preventative check from a private or public sector dentist, refundable by Medicare. While many primary schoolchildren receive school dental services, these services are not as widely available to teenagers. By targeting teenagers, the scheme will not only ease cost pressures but also encourage young adults to continue to look after their teeth once they become independent and move out of home.

The Rudd Labor government are truly committed to delivering better health outcomes for Australians through our health and hospital system. We have said on many occasions that preventative health is a key priority of the Rudd government. The health system needs to be refocused so that it keeps people well and prevents disease. The multi-million dollar investment that the Rudd Labor government are making in the Teen Dental Plan demonstrates our determination to make this priority a reality. I am pleased, as I said, that the Rudd Labor government is acting on this issue.

Everyone recognises that having healthy teeth is important to a teenager's self-confidence, especially at a time when many are out seeking their first job. This government understands the issues that are affecting Australian working families, and affordable dental care is one of them. We have identified the problems and are now taking action to fix them. I am proud to be part of a government that is fixing this real, day-to-day issue that is affecting Australian families. I commend the bill to the Senate.