

MEDIA RELEASE

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Four in ten older Australians skipping the dentist due to cost COTA Australia calls for action on dental cover

Almost four in ten Australians (37%) aged 55+ have delayed or completely put off going to the dentist in the past year due to cost, research released today by COTA Australia – the leading advocacy organisation for older Australians has found.

That number increases to 44% of older Australians on lower incomes, which includes many pensioners and those in aged care.

The research, released to mark World Oral Health Day (20 March) also shows that 73% of all Australians support the introduction of a Seniors Dental Benefits Scheme – a scheme which would give older Australians who need it access to quality, affordable dental care – and four in five people believe dental care should be covered by Medicare.

COTA Australia Chief Executive Officer, Patricia Sparrow, said the number of older Australians putting off dental care is incredibly alarming given the broader health and wellbeing implications, especially for older people who are particularly susceptible to the overall health impacts of poor dental care.

Ms Sparrow said the findings are further evidence that the Federal Government needs to take urgent steps to introduce a Seniors Dental Benefit Scheme - a scheme recommended by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety for all residents of nursing homes, pensioners or Seniors Healthcare Card holders living in the community.

“The fact that we’ve got four in every ten older Australians skipping or delaying their dental care should be a real wake up call to our politicians,” Ms Sparrow said.

“These findings back up what we’re hearing directly from older people. It’s not uncommon for us to hear stories of older Australians not getting the urgent dental work they require simply because it’s too expensive.

“Good oral health is vital for maintaining good overall health, and the risks of not getting the care people need can be incredibly serious – even life threatening in some extreme cases.

“Having good dental care is essential to good health, no matter what your age. But we know that as you get older the risk of broader health implications increase.”

Ms Sparrow said its particularly alarming that those on lower incomes, and those who self-identify as struggling financially, are skipping the dentist at the highest rates.

“Millions of Australians, both young and older, are putting their health at risk because they simply can’t afford the dental and oral care they need.

“Having dental bulk billed through Medicare would ensure people can get the care they need, limit the number of people getting ill as a result of not getting the care they need, and will help address our current cost of living crisis. It’s a common-sense solution to an increasingly alarming problem impacting millions of Australians of every age.”

“The first, most urgent step, for the Federal Government should be to introduce a publicly funded senior Seniors Dental Benefits Scheme bulk billed through Medicare, as was recommended by the Royal Commission into Aged Care.”

Key research findings

The poll was commissioned by COTA Australia and conducted by Essential Research. Key findings include:

- 37% of Australians aged 55+ have delaying or completely put off going to the dentist in the past year due to cost;
- 44% of older Australians on lower incomes have delaying or completely put off going to the dentist in the past year due to cost;
- 57% of Australians aged 55+ who say they are financially struggling have delayed or completely put off going to the dentist in the past year due to cost;
- 73% of all Australians support the introduction of a Seniors Dental Benefits Scheme;
- Four in five people (79%) believe dental care should be covered by Medicare;
- 89% of Australians of all ages who are in serious financial difficulty believe dental care should be covered by Medicare.

COTA Australia's calls for the Federal Government to fund a Seniors Dental Benefits Scheme have been backed in by the National Oral Health Alliance, and its members including the Australian Dental Association.

Find out more at <https://cota.org.au/get-involved/seniors-dental-benefits-scheme/>

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