

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

[Ms RISHWORTH](#) (Kingston) (6.09 p.m.)—I rise in support of the [Dental Benefits Bill 2008](#) and the [Dental Benefits \(Consequential Amendments\) Bill 2008](#). Dental health is not only a critical component of a person's general health but also plays a special role in dictating their enjoyment of life and emotional wellbeing. Few chronic ailments are more frustrating and painful than dental problems. Poor dental health can exacerbate many health conditions.

While working as a psychologist, I treated many people whose dental health problems significantly impacted on their quality of life and their self-esteem. Residents in my electorate of Kingston regularly tell me of the time they have spent on public dental waiting lists, and their stories share a common thread of immense agony and frustration that their problem could be fixed if only they could have an appointment with a dentist. Many of these people are seniors who worked in low- to middle-income jobs for much of their working lives, paid their taxes year in and year out and understandably expected that when they retired there would be a dental system that they could rely on.

Research has shown that the growing dental waiting lists are putting pressure on the rest of the healthcare system, with 50,000 people per year presenting to our public hospitals with preventable dental conditions. This situation is not only unacceptable because of the undue suffering it causes, it makes it clear that underinvestment in preventive and primary dental care costs much, much more in the long term. Rather than investing more in dental care and taking real action to address waiting lists, one of the first actions of the previous government was to abandon the Commonwealth Dental Health Program and cut a \$100 million in funding from Australia's dental healthcare system. The attitude and ideology of the previous government with regard to Australia's dental care system provides a case study of their border approach to government. They slashed the Commonwealth investment. This meant that a visit to the dentist took more money out of the pockets of working families or meant that they could not afford to go at all.

I am disappointed to hear during this debate that those on the other side continue to believe that the Commonwealth should shirk its responsibility when it comes to investing in dental health. Earlier in this debate, the member for Fadden said that the funding for dental care was wholly the responsibility of the state governments. The people that I talk to in my electorate of Kingston who are in need of dental care are not persuaded by the 'blame it on the state' approach advanced by the member for Fadden and those on the other side. They just want their dental complaints attended to.

After dismantling the Commonwealth investment in dental care, the previous government bowed under immense public pressure and introduced a lacklustre, limited dental program that only assisted people who had dental problems in conjunction with other chronic illnesses. It did not matter if you were in excruciating pain and were a pensioner in desperate need of assistance—if you did not have a chronic disease, you were ineligible. The facts bear out that this program not only was a bureaucratic nightmare for providers but also denied care to some of the people in our community who were most in need.

The Rudd government is taking real action to fix the dental healthcare crisis. This bill delivers on the commitment that we made at the election to deliver better dental care to Australians and to make it easier for families and for their teenage kids to visit the dentist. The new Commonwealth Dental Health Program is an additional investment of \$290 million over three years into dental care in Australia and will provide funding for up to one million extra treatments and consultations. This extra investment shows the government's commitment to our public dental system and will begin to help the 650,000 Australians currently on the public dental waiting lists.

This new program will deliver for the most needy in our community, including pensioners, preschool-aged children and Indigenous people. The investment has been warmly welcomed by many whom I have spoken to in the electorate of Kingston. Many of my constituents report waiting over two years for an appointment in the public dental system. The Commonwealth investment will have a significant impact on these waiting lists and ensure that many people in my electorate will be able to be seen in the public dental system, including in services such as those situated at the Noarlunga Health Village. Certainly, as I go around speaking to people, dental care comes up time and time again. I attended the dental program at the Noarlunga Health Village and saw the immense number of people waiting there. The room was crowded with people waiting, and as I went round I spoke to these people. Some had been waiting two, three or four years for services, and indeed some people reported missing their appointment, for reasons outside their control, after waiting for two years and then being required to wait another two years to get in. This is just unacceptable and a real problem.

People I speak to know that the previous government did shirk their responsibilities. They did not invest in dental care, and this became a real problem. In addition, as also became quite evident in my visits, there was a lot of concern about workforce shortage, whether it be in doctors, nurses or dentists. This is an issue that the previous government continued to ignore. As I have learned by speaking with dentists, doctors and nurses around my electorate, it becomes a problem and a real issue in the outer metropolitan areas of Kingston. I will continue to advocate on their behalf to ensure that we do address this workforce shortage.

Another major program that is delivered by this bill is the Medicare Teen Dental Plan, which delivers on another commitment that the government made at the election. This program will provide up to \$150 per year to eligible persons towards the cost of annual preventive check-ups by a dentist. I think this initiative is particularly important in its emphasis on prevention. Prevention is key whatever health area you look at, whether that be dental care, mental health or general health issues. The importance of preventive health care for individuals to stop suffering is immeasurable, but the cost to the public purse is also important. Making sure that prevention does occur is essential when it comes to dental care, and I really commend the Rudd government for this important initiative.

About 1.1 million teenagers aged between 12 and 17 in families receiving family tax benefit part A, youth allowance or Abstudy will be eligible for the scheme. Families can choose to use the rebate at a dentist of their choice, regardless of whether it is public or private. This will be very important in allowing people to access a dentist who may live near their home. It does not make sense to have to travel a long way to access a dentist, so being able to access a dentist who is located near the family home does take added stress off the family. Helping teenagers visit the dentist will mean that minor dental

problems can be identified and fixed before they become major health issues. As I mentioned, this is really essential, not only for the individual but also for the public purse. Getting teenagers into the habit of visiting the dentist regularly will put them in good stead for adulthood and provide an opportunity to teach young people about the importance of looking after their health. There is nothing more important than getting young people into the routine of checking their teeth, brushing their teeth and generally practising good dental hygiene.

Labor governments have never shied away from making sure that good health care is available to all Australians, and these new programs demonstrate the Rudd government's commitment to a dental health system based on fairness and human decency, not on squabbling about constitutional details of service delivery or on an ideological obsession with privatising Australia's healthcare system. Really, the dismantling of the Commonwealth dental care program that John Howard had in his first term can only be seen as an ideological drive to push people into private health care. Private health care has a place; however, as I said in my maiden speech, it is essential that we do provide adequate health care to everyone, no matter how much money they have in their purse, and that we ensure that these people have a good quality of life. I think that this investment, one of our key election promises that we are delivering in our first budget, is essential to ensuring that we deliver to the community, and it has been especially welcomed in my community in Kingston. I believe that this will deliver real outcomes to the most needy in our community, and I am very proud to be part of a government that is delivering this budget initiative. I commend this bill to the House.