

The Public Dental System is in Decay

Patients Waiting up to 30 Months

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Melburnians are waiting up to 30 months to see a dentist!

Some desperate patients are ringing around to find a public dental clinic with shorter waiting times.

Broadmeadows, Frankston, Berwick, Cranbourne and Sunbury are among the suburbs with waiting times of up to 30 months.

But for those living in Fitzroy, Northcote and Preston, the wait is between three and five months.

The Australian Dental Association has called on the State Government to boost funding for public dental services to end the waiting game.

"The most recent State Budget did not have any growth funding for dentistry, and funding for dental services was only increased by \$2.2 million," said Victorian branch president Associate Prof Matthew Hopcraft.

"That represented an increase of 1.3 per cent despite inflation running at 3.3 per cent and the Victorian population increasing by 1500 people every week."

A spokesman for Health Minister, David Davis, acknowledged waiting times were too long and said the Government had allocated \$7.27 million over four years to target areas of high need.

Children's tooth decay is also an area of concern with a study showing more than half of six-year-olds are losing their baby teeth to decay.

Melbourne boy Jackson Baker, 6 has had six teeth removed, five fillings, two root canals performed and two silver crowns fitted.

A National Child Oral Health Survey is planned this year, which will determine just how bad Australian children's teeth are.

Low-income Nillumbik residents will continue to wait about two years for basic dental care unless its public clinic receives a significant funding boost.

Nillumbik Community Health Service chief executive Amanda Murphy said the Main Rd clinic needed an extra \$100,000 to \$200,000 a year to make significant inroads into its waiting list, which stood at 25 months in December.

She said the practice had instead received a \$50,000 cut in the last State Budget. "We have had a reduction in our funding, more than we expected, and are concerned our clinic's capacity is strained," Ms Murphy said.

"What we need is additional funding to run the chairs for an extended amount of time."

Ms Murphy said private dentist vouchers, supplied by Dental Health Services Victoria to ease waiting lists, had dried up in the past two years. But she added that the three-chair clinic had been conducting extra sessions on Monday evenings and Saturday mornings in an attempt to keep queue lengths steady.

"We have been specifically focussing on getting these times down in the past couple of years," she said.

"(But) without extra funding we will be almost remain at the status quo."

Jackson hopes to close gap after surgery drama. Jackson Baker says he hopes he never sees another dentist.

The six-year-old's mother took him to the Melbourne Dental Hospital in December and, over two hours, he had six teeth removed, five fillings, two root canals and he had two silver crowns fitted.

Mother Amanda Webb, from Melton, says Jackson's lack of teeth has made family life difficult.

"He can't eat steak, chops, (or) even bite into apples," she said.

"The dentist told us that his tooth decay was down to a poor diet, but he's not a big sweet eater, and I always made sure he brushed his teeth twice a day."

The waiting time for adult appointments at Melton Health is 23 months but appointments for children like Jackson are given priority and they are normally seen within 30 days.

Children with dental emergencies are assessed within 24 hours and a treatment plan developed.

Although most children are treated at the clinic, sometimes they are referred to other services for specialist treatment or general anaesthesia.

Chief executive Bruce Marshall said better oral health was everyone's responsibility.

The message is clear: "Drink well, eat well and clean well", he said.

"Reducing the amount of sweetened drinks and increasing water consumption helps oral health."

Mr Marshall said fruit, yoghurt and vegetables should be eaten rather than sweet snacks and teeth should be brushed twice a day, after meals and before bed.

LISA Comment: Dental health may be difficult for many in the community, with little indication dental care will ever be added to Medicare.

Yet, for many of those with intellectual and multiple disabilities, living in group homes, the dental situation is largely a matter of 'attitude of care', especially for those residents of group homes where the Department of Human Services, Victoria, is the service provider.

Many residents of DHS group home have adequate disposable income to allow them to have private health insurance, including dental. But there is little incentive by DHS, the primary carer, to instigate this.

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