

Question on Notice
No. 162
Asked on 9 March 2011

MRS SULLIVAN asked the Minister for Health (MR WILSON)-

QUESTION:

Since the former Howard Liberal Government axed the Commonwealth Dental Health Scheme (previously introduced by the Keating Labor Government), what has this State Government done to assist Queenslanders in their oral health needs?

ANSWER:

I thank the Honourable Member for Pumicestone for her question.

When the Commonwealth Dental Health Program (CDHP) was discontinued in 1996, Queensland was the only State to fully replace the withdrawn Commonwealth funds from State funds. All the other States and Territories either reduced services or introduced co-payments in order to address the shortfall in Commonwealth funding.

In 2007, the new Federal Government proposed several new initiatives including the reinstatement of the CDHP. The Queensland Government's oral health services would have been significantly bolstered by this funding, but unfortunately the scheme was stalled in the Senate by non-government members. The CDHP would have increased funding to Queensland oral health services by \$52.8 million over four years and delivered an additional 187,000 dental consultations in Queensland.

In the meantime, Queensland Health is committed to improving oral health services to all entitled Queenslanders and provides the most comprehensive public oral health service in Australia with over 1.9 million people (45.3% of the total Queensland population) eligible for dental care at no cost. Public oral health services provided a total of 929,973 occasions of service in 2009/10, with a budget expenditure of approximately \$166 million.

As well as funding public oral dental services, the State Government has supported the dental workforce more broadly in Queensland by providing ongoing financial support to the three Queensland dental schools at University of Queensland, Griffith University and James Cook University. This includes a commitment in the 2010/11 State Budget of \$45 million over four years towards building and operating new James Cook University dental clinic training facilities. From just 45 students in 2006, it is projected there will be over 200 new dentists graduating in Queensland each year once all three universities are graduating dentists by 2013.

The State Government has also assisted Queenslanders in their oral health needs by implementing water fluoridation. In 2008, the Water Fluoridation Act was introduced with the aim of progressively fluoridating Queensland's waters supplies over the period to December 2012 to a coverage of 95% of the population with access to a reticulated supply, including Indigenous communities who have populations of less than 1000.

Extensive scientific evidence shows water fluoridation combined with good oral hygiene and a healthy diet will help reduce levels of tooth decay by up to 40%. Water fluoridation was the missing element in Queensland's approach to improving oral health, and its introduction shifts the focus to prevention over cure.