



Bridging the city-country health divide must be a priority for the next government

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Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) is calling for the Albanese Government to take immediate action to fix the deepening divide in healthcare access, starting with dental care.

Australians all across the country, from metropolitan areas to remote towns, should be able to receive dental and oral care whenever needed, and their postcode or bank balance shouldn't be a deciding factor.

"No one should have to travel thousands of kilometres away or wait five to ten years just to have their teeth checked. That is not a system - that's abandonment," CEO of Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) Dr Elizabeth Deveny said.

"Dental care is health care. It's not cosmetic, it's not optional, and it shouldn't be out of reach because of where you live or how much you earn.

"It's time to bring all of dental into Medicare while also closing the rural health divide. We need a system that serves everybody, from capital cities to the most remote towns. Access to dental care shouldn't depend on your income or postcode. We must end the postcode lottery in dental health and make the system truly universal."

One third of Australians live outside major cities, yet many face long waits, out-of-pocket costs and poorer health outcomes all because of where they live.

CHF is pushing for a package of reforms to make all dental care more affordable, timely and accessible.

There are calls for an expansion of Medicare to include dental care, closure of the healthcare gap for people living in rural and regional areas, and stronger Medicare incentives to attract and retain specialists in the regions.

“Finding accessible and affordable dental care is harder when you’re outside the major cities. But simple and smart reforms can improve outcomes for regional and rural patients,” Dr Deveny said.

“Dental health is a major blind spot in our universal health system. Over and over again, we are told consumers avoid essential ongoing treatment because they can’t afford it because of how expensive dental care is and the low Medicare and health insurance rebates.

“Parents are living with guilt because they can’t afford to provide treatment such as braces for their children, which is an awful position for Australian parents to be in.”

CHF is a proud member of the National Oral Health Alliance and supports the Alliance’s five-point plan to give Australia the oral healthcare system it needs. The five points are:

- Expand Medicare to include dental care so all Australians can access affordable dental services no matter where they live
- Enhance affordability and access in regional and rural areas by increasing bulk-billing incentives for GPs, specialists and dental services, particularly in areas with socio-economic disadvantage
- A system to ensure automatic application of the PBS Safety Net pricing
- Improve access to healthcare services through longer and more flexible specialist referrals so consumers don’t have to keep going back to their GP
- More investment in consumer health peak bodies so the voices of rural and regional Australians are heard in healthcare policy and decision-making.