

## **Eight in ten Australians financially strained by dental costs as budget looms**

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A major new survey has found that eight in ten Australians experience financial strain from out-of-pocket dental costs, with one in eight reporting serious strain affecting their ability to pay for essentials including food.

The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) today released Understanding how Australian health consumers navigate their oral health and dental care, a national survey of 910 people.

The findings expose the human cost of a dental system where price - not need - determines who gets treated and when.

Respondents described cutting back on groceries, drawing on superannuation, flying overseas for treatment, and relying on food charities to afford dental care.

One respondent borrowed from a family member for emergency dental care, saying they would otherwise have had to sell belongings. Another relied on charity food for several fortnights after paying for a tooth extraction.

"Australians still trust the care they receive. What they don't trust is whether they can afford it when they need it," CHF CEO Dr Elizabeth Deveny said.

"That gap between confidence in care and confidence in affordability is the fault line in our health system. When people are withdrawing their super or skipping meals to fix their teeth, that fault line isn't at the edges of the system. It's at the centre.

The burden falls heaviest on people on pensions or fixed incomes, older Australians, those living with chronic illness or disability, and those living in smaller rural and remote communities - groups already absorbing the fuel and grocery price hikes.

More than 60% of those eligible for public dental care delayed or cancelled treatment due to long wait times. More than a quarter of all respondents didn't know whether they were even eligible for public services.

When people delay care because of cost or confusion, those pressures don't disappear - they show up later in emergency departments and worse health outcomes for people who were already vulnerable."

# Consumers Health Forum of Australia

Wait-related delays are worse outside major cities, affecting 76% of respondents in smaller rural and remote communities compared with 58% in metropolitan areas. Yet quality is not the problem: once people are seen, 57% rate public dental care as excellent or very good.

Among all respondents experiencing financial strain, one in five (18.4%) pointed to unexpected out of pocket gaps despite having private health insurance. Many described paying premiums for years under the assumption they were covered, only to face significant costs when they needed dental care.

Support for government action is near-unanimous with 94% of respondents supporting increased federal funding for public dental services.

"Australians are not asking for anything radical. They are asking for dental care to be treated like healthcare, at a minimum," Dr Deveny said.

"The upcoming Budget is an opportunity to act on what consumers have been saying clearly for years.

"CHF is calling on the federal government to fund priority oral health access schemes for older people, First Nations people and people on low incomes, and increase public dental service capacity as a first step towards universal oral healthcare - an investment of \$15.7 billion over four years."

"If we want a health system that people trust, it must be one they can actually afford to use. That is not a complicated ask. It is the baseline," Dr Deveny said.

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