

ARTICLE

Child dental scheme a 'success' despite government's failure to promote it

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A federal government program that has provided free dental care to one million children - and which Health Minister Sussan Ley indicated could be axed or overhauled - has been judged a success in a review by Ms Ley's own department.

Headed by the country's top medical officer, the review team's report said it was "pleased" that the two-year old scheme, the Child Dental Benefits Schedule, had provided free dental care to children "at an age when preventive measures can be most effective."

It made a range of recommendations to ensure the scheme's "ongoing success and effectiveness".

Although original targets for the scheme may have been too ambitious, it said the scheme had been "underutilised, which is possibly a reflection of its underpromotion".

Only 30 per cent of eligible children have so far used the scheme, resulting in a "significant underspend of allocated funding" found the Auditor General. Only \$433 million of the \$736 million budgeted for the first 18 months from January 2014 had been spent.

The review report, a legislative requirement, was tabled without fanfare around the time that the Australian Dental Association revealed that the federal government had indicated it planned to either axe or radically change the \$2.7 billion dental program. The Prime Minister has subsequently confirmed that the scheme is under review, and could be scrapped.

The review said it was pleased with the dental scheme for children.

In consultations with dental groups, the minister said the scheme was too expensive and later confirmed that she was investigating reforms to make the means-tested scheme more effective and cater to those most in need. A spokesman for the minister said the government remained "absolutely

committed to improving the oral health of Australia's children."



Under current arrangements, the scheme expires on June 30 this year.

Critics claim that the Coalition government has failed to publicise the scheme because it was a Labor initiative. Other than one mass mailing, families are usually notified of eligibility with a notification letter.

Opposition health spokeswoman Catherine King said the government's own report confirmed Labor's dental scheme was a success.

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"It shows the scheme has been providing dental services to the kids who need it most but the Turnbull government is deliberately hiding this, denying millions of kids the chance to get their teeth fixed."

The scheme provides \$1000 of free dental care to children aged 2 to 17 whose parents are receiving government benefits. Most services are bulk-billed.

"Over 50 per cent of all six-year-olds have experienced tooth decay, and more than 24,000 children under 14 were hospitalised for dental treatment in 2013-14 alone."

"These are scary stats by themselves," said the petitioner. It said a child's dental health can affect their school performance, social skills, and even lifestyle and job prospects.

Benefits Schedule provides up to \$1,000 in benefits for basic dental services, capped over two consecutive calendar years.

A child is eligible for the Child Dental Benefits Schedule if he or she is aged between 2-17 years old for at least one day in the calendar year, is eligible for Medicare and is part of a family that receives a relevant Australian government payment such as Family Tax Benefit Part A. The child(ren) remain eligible all year, even if the payment that made them eligible stops this year or if they turn 18 this year.

Eligible child(ren) and benefit cap amount(s)
Listed below is/are the eligible child(ren) in your family and each child's benefit cap amount.

| Full name | Benefit cap amount* |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| <First name> <Surname> | \$XXXX.XX |
| <First name> <Surname> | \$XXXX.XX |
| <First name> <Surname> | \$XXXX.XX |

* A child's benefit cap amount starts the year they first receive a dental service.

Australian Government
Department of Human Services
medicare

Medicare Teen Dental Plan
Annual preventative dental check

Your \$163.05 teen dental voucher

This voucher is valid between 1 January and 31 December 2012

This voucher entitles:
to claim a dental benefit from Medicare for one preventative dental check this calendar year, as long as all eligibility requirements of the service are met. The service is described below. Take this voucher and your Medicare card to your appointment.

Who can provide the preventative dental check?

- Private dentists
- dentists in public dental clinics, including school-based clinics, and
- dental hygienists or dental therapists under supervision or oversight of a dentist.

How do I use the voucher?

Using the voucher is easy—just make an appointment with a dentist.

When making a booking, ask:

- does the dentist accept the voucher
- will the voucher cover the full cost of the check, and
- what does the dentist expect to be covered?

The more eye-catching way a previous scheme was promoted.

The review said more could done to make this letter more attractive and promote the scheme's benefits.

The health department review team recommended that the government make its eligibility letter more attractive - and do more to make the scheme attractive, engage marketing experts and try new channels.

Alarmed by the plan to axe the scheme, more than 10,000 people have signed a Change.org petition started by dentists to lobby Ms Ley to keep the keep the scheme.

"The dental health of Australia's kids is already in peril," it warns.

One supporter wrote: "Our future generations deserve a better smile."

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