



Sharon Grierson MP
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Dental Services

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (9.53 am)—I rise today to share with the House the problems that people in Newcastle and all around Australia are facing in accessing vital dental healthcare services. Research released just last week by the Australia Fair group found that 46 per cent of people reported that it would be difficult for them to pay the \$300 needed for basic preventative dental treatment. The same number of people said that the cost of dental care influences their decision to see a dentist regularly. Twenty-three per cent of people said they have not seen a dentist for over two years. We know that there are about 50,000 hospital admissions for preventable dental conditions each year and that there are 650,000 people on public dental waiting lists.

To take just one example from my electorate last year, one of my constituents contacted our office seeking assistance. He had been having significant problems with his teeth and needed dentures. After failing to be able to access any public services, being told that it would take 18 months, he finally went to a private dentist and paid the \$4,300 fee with his credit card. He is on a pension and is, as you can imagine, barely keeping on top of the interest charge, which may even increase after today.

How did it come to this? We have pensioners putting dental treatment on their credit cards. One of the most infamous decisions of the Howard government when it came to power 11 years ago was to abolish the \$100-million a year Commonwealth dental program. That is just over \$1 billion the Howard government has not spent on dental health care in the last 11 years. That is a lot of money, so what would it have bought? What does it actually buy? Well, if you are the Howard government hell-bent on spending its way back into power, it has bought a lot of advertising. In fact, it is uncanny when you look at the numbers, this government has actually spent \$2 billion on advertising in that 11 years. That is two Commonwealth dental programs worth of advertising that we have seen the money spent on, while 650,000 people wait for treatment.

People all over this nation are asking the government to do something about dental health. People have been asking why the Howard government has abandoned working families and the Howard government's response, currently, is to blame the states. It is the same old tired buck-passing and the same old blame game. The health minister says:

"...people should direct their concerns to the state governments. They need to take responsibility and I think that public dental care is appropriately in that domain."

People do not care about that response. The survey found that 75 per cent of Australians think the Commonwealth should at least share the funding for dental care. As the Prime Minister himself said recently:

"... Australians are interested in good outcomes, they're not interested in theories of governance."

Here is a good outcome: Kevin Rudd and federal Labor will establish a Commonwealth dental program to make dental care accessible to working families again. Kevin Rudd and federal Labor will end the Howard government's blame game and actually do what the Commonwealth can and should be doing to address this important issue.