



Book now, decay later

By **BELINDA BRAND**

REGION - Residents across the Fleurieu are being forced to wait at least 17 months for routine dental care in the public system.

Port Elliot resident Rhonda Edwards has just been given an appointment after waiting for months, and said the current system needs more dentists and funding from the government.

"They've got this system now with pensioners they assess you first to see what treatment they think you need then that it is based on a matter of urgency. So they will ask is hot and cold food upsetting you? Do you need to take painkillers? All for a decaying tooth.

"My point is why should we allow our teeth to decay further before getting the treatment, it should be a more preventative system.

"At the same time it shouldn't be a matter of forcing someone else out to have treatment, I do understand the priorities but the whole overall system is poor and the government need more dentists," Mrs Edwards said.

"It is a tough ball game, I have

six or seven lower teeth left in my mouth, I have an upper denture, and if I lose the lower teeth I will have to have a lower denture which is a nightmare waiting to happen.

"Unless you have other savings pensioners are left without ... at the moment if you need a denture the government offer Kmart quality whereas if you can afford private care you get David Jones quality," she said.

Regional Director (Southern Region) of South Australian Dental Service (SADS) David Clark confirmed the seventeen-month waiting list in Victor Harbor.

"The difficulty is that it is hard to assess how long a waiting list really is. What it really says is that the person at the top of the list has been waiting for seventeen months.

"Staffing has been an issue in Victor Harbor, but it's not at the moment. We have six chairs working to capacity, and we also have final year dental students doing their final clinical studies at Victor Harbor," he said.

Mr Clark said emergency

patients would be given treatment as soon as possible.

"If someone presents with an emergency we assess it, and if it is a high priority dental emergency, if there is swelling or infection and so on, we generally get them an appointment within 24 hours, and at least within the next 10 days.

"If it is assessed and it is decided that it is not an emergency, then that patient has the choice to be put on a waiting list or seek private dental care," Mr Clark said.

Another Port Elliot pensioner said when she went looking for treatment in the public system, she was told she had to wait twelve months before putting her name on a waiting list, then had to wait a further two years to get an appointment for a checkup.

"I've hardly got any teeth left in the four years being under the public system, I'm just a pensioner with a mortgage ... to go to a private dentist costs thousands of dollars.

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Wait 'not acceptable

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"I don't know why we have to suffer so much when we get older and can't afford it? it is at the stage now where I can't chew properly and I'm worried about having to have dentures."

The Member for Finnis Michael Pengilly said he has been receiving calls from people in the Goolwa and Victor Harbor region regarding the future of the public dental service.

"I have had messages that the service is closing, this is incorrect, going on information supplied to me by government officers," Mr Pengilly said.

"I am very pleased that this service is maintained as it should be and hopefully this will

put resident's fears to rest.

"The current waiting times of up to seventeen months are not acceptable however, and this is one aspect that needs addressing," he said.

Mr Clark said in an attempt to shorten waiting lists, patients were sometimes referred to private practitioners.

"One of the strategies to deal with the length of the waiting list is to refer patients to a private clinic, where they receive their treatment and still contribute the same amount as they would being a public patient," he said.

"The problem with that is the limited number of private practitioners in the area limits the service we can offer."