

14 September 2020

The Hon Stephen Wade MLC  
Minister for Health and Wellbeing  
GPO Box 2555  
ADELAIDE SA 5001

Dear Minister

We are writing to express our concerns that the Residential Aged Care Dental Scheme will close on 30 September 2020. This state government trial provides oral health care to people who live in residential aged care. For them, and for the residential aged care providers hosting it, it seems to have been an outstanding success.

According to SA Health's own 2018 consultation paper, dental decay is the third highest cause of potentially preventable hospitalisation nationally and in South Australia the most common preventable condition. The end of this trial - a best practice and nation leading initiative - without replacement or a way forward does not make sense.

The COTA SA 2020-21 State Budget submission urges the State Government (with the Federal Government) to improve access to oral health care services for older South Australians, particularly those on low incomes. Poor oral health has significant "knock on" effects that contribute to other health and social issues including heart disease, poor nutrition, isolation and depression.

The State Government's Oral Health Plan last year identified "frail older people" as a special interest group but the plan lacked concrete strategies. The waiting period for public dental services in Adelaide is about 18 months (and more in country areas) and cost prevents older people on low incomes from accessing private dental services.

The replacement of the Residential Aged Care Dental Scheme with the Residential Aged Care Emergency Dental Service is very disappointing. While we acknowledge the importance of emergency dental coverage for residents of Residential Aged Care Facilities, the new model addresses only very severe dental emergencies and does nothing to support residents to access dental hygiene services and proactive dental care. Oral health was identified as a major quality and safety issue by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety in their interim report where they noted '...insufficient attention to oral health, leading to widespread malnutrition, excruciating dental and other pain, and secondary conditions.'

We note that the National Dental Partnership Agreement between the federal and state governments has been extended and is now due to expire in May 2021.

We urge our SA government to make holistic and preventative oral health care for older people (including those living in residential aged care) a much higher priority in the future. The stop-start nature of trial oral health programs, temporary funding arrangements and confused responsibility between the state and federal governments is not conducive to ageing well. Indeed, it is often the cause of unnecessary and avoidable pain, marginalisation, hospitalisation, malnutrition and oral disease.

Minister, while oral health care must ultimately be part of universal health care through Medicare, we urge your Government to lead the way in your negotiations with the federal government to create a stable, reliable and evidence based approach to oral health care for older South Australians.

Yours sincerely



**Jane Mussared**  
Chief Executive  
COTA SA



**Rosetta Rosa**  
State Manager SA/NT  
Leading Age Services Australia Ltd



**Derek Dittrich**  
Senior Manager - Strategic Policy and State  
Manager (SA/NT)  
Aged and Community Services Australia



**Luke Westenberg**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Aged Care Industry Association