

DENTAL HEALTH SCHEME

**727. Mr P. PAPALIA to the Minister for Health:**

One of the first things the Howard government did when it came to power 11 years ago was to axe the commonwealth dental health program. Can the Minister for Health tell the house what effect this has had on Western Australians and how this would change under a Rudd Labor government?

**Mr J.A. McGINTY replied:**

I thank the member for Peel for the very insightful question. I am sure that all members are aware that one of the first things John Howard did when he came to power in 1996 was to scrap the commonwealth dental scheme, which withdrew about \$100 million from dental care, particularly from low-income, mainly elderly Australians, including Western Australians. Hopefully, one of the first announcements of a Rudd government next week will be the reinstatement of the commonwealth dental scheme to ensure that people have access to first-class quality dental care. The state had to pick up the slack caused by John Howard abandoning his responsibilities in the field of dental care. What we have been able to do in the face of John Howard withdrawing his funding, which was mean-spirited in the extreme, is a great success story. We have injected more money into the state scheme in order to pick up what has been taken out by John Howard. Over the past four years funding has increased by 35 per cent from \$43 million to \$59 million a year. What that has done to our waiting list for public dental care in Western Australia is nothing short of sensational. On 1 January 2004 there were 25 000 people waiting an average of 17.3 months for public dental care in Western Australia. My good friend the member for Albany drew this problem to my attention, particularly its impact in the major regional centres. Money was injected, and today that number of 25 000 has been slashed to 11 654 people now waiting an average of nine months for dental care. We still need to do more. I am sure we will be able to do more with the new commonwealth government. This figure compares with the other Australian states. The waiting time in Queensland is 27 months; in Victoria it is 23 months; in the Northern Territory it is 24 months; and in South Australia it is 28 months. That is an indication of how well we are doing, despite John Howard's withdrawal from the field.

The federal Liberal government put its toe back in the water on dental care in 2004 when Tony Abbott announced that there would be very limited public access to dental care via the medical benefits schedule. It was available only to people who had a chronic condition and complex care needs, those who had poor oral health or who had a dental condition that was exacerbating a chronic and complex disease that was being managed by a general practitioner under an enhanced primary care plan. Last year 107 Western Australians took advantage of that very generous commonwealth provision. Tens of thousands of people need dental care.

One of the very good things that has been announced in recent times is the reinstatement of the commonwealth dental scheme under a Labor government should one be elected on Saturday. It has promised \$290 million over the years ahead. That will represent about \$10 million per annum for Western Australia. That will enable 30 000 patients to access dental care in the public system each year. I think it is tremendously good news. Waiting lists will reduce to such an extent that the waiting time will be down to around three or four months. That is for non-urgent, routine treatment. It will also enable a change in the service mix to put more emphasis on preventative services, particularly for young people. We will also be able to complement the existing, and I believe very successful, country patients dental subsidy scheme as well as the metropolitan patients dental subsidy scheme in which the private sector treats public patients, and it is paid for out of the public purse. I would like to see those schemes extended. They will be. I think everyone's dental health will be a lot better after next Saturday.