Australia commits to dental health care reform, sets up taskforce

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HONG KONG/LEIPZIG, Germany: In a last minute effort to commit to dental health care reform, the Australian government has decided to provide additional funding of AU$55 (US$56 million) to public dental services over the next four years. The funding will be used to establish more dental internship programmes in order to reduce waiting times for dental treatment, government officials said in May. They also announced to set up a National Advisory Council on Dental Health to plan further steps to reform the inadequate public dental system.

The Greens have welcomed the commitment, which they see as a first step in long-term dental care reform. They reminded Labor that dental care also has to remain top priority in next year's budget. The coalition between both parties has struggled politically over the last two months regarding how much money should be spent to improve the country’s poor public dental health care system. The Greens’ promotion of a universal dental care scheme for all Australians was a key factor for forming a coalition with Labor in last year's federal elections.

In March, Labor Minister of Health Nicole Roxon announced that dental care funding would be scrapped altogether from this year’s budget. Dental representatives said that although the funding will help patients nationwide to access delayed dental treatment, it will probably not be enough to cut down waiting times, particularly in rural areas. In addition, the government should be focusing on ways to entice dentists to work in underserved areas like the South.

“Things like scholarships for dental graduates so that they’re paid during dentistry and when they graduate they commit themselves to rural areas or relocation payments like the government has done for general practitioners,” Dr. Angela Pierce, President of the South Australian Branch of the Australian Dental Association told the ABC News network.

Waiting times for public dental services in Australia have remained high over the last few years owing to the shortage of dental staff. According to a 2008 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, patients relying on public dental services are three times more likely to suffer from dental diseases such as caries or periodontal disease.

Australia’s Prime Minister Julia Gillard (second from left) inspecting damage during a recent visit to Japan. Australia’s inadequate public dental health care system also needs her attention, dentists say. (DTI/Photo courtesy of ALP, Australia)