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Dental care: filling the gap

That a third of low-income adults avoid some foods because of problems with their teeth is telling evidence of the need for dental care reform in Australia, the Consumers Health Forum said today.

A report by the Grattan Institute today has called for a universal dental care scheme to help end the plight experienced by about two million Australians a year who did not get or delayed dental care because of cost.

“That so many Australians have to avoid some foods shows the pervasive impact of poor dental health, yet we persist with poor public dental schemes when we could afford to do much better.

“The report calculates that a scheme to ensure all Australians can go to the dentist would cost an extra $5.6 billion year and could be paid for in part by a rise in the Medicare levy.

“That is a lot of money but it is a fraction of the current cost of Medicare and would contribute to a fundamental improvement in the health of millions of Australians.

“Poor oral health can lead to pain, discomfort, hospitalisation and disease all combining to put additional cost burdens on the system in the form of subsidized medicines, GP visits and avoidable hospitalisations”.

“Whether it be a universal, Medicare-style scheme or some other way to subsidise and open up better access to dental health care, including preventive services, there is no doubt this is health financing debate we have to resolve. No Australian should have to put their dental health care needs last.

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“As the Grattan health program director, Dr Stephen Duckett says, there is no compelling medical, economic, legal or logical reason to treat the mouth so differently from the best of the body,” Ms Wells said.