

New South Wales state election

SEP candidate prevented from addressing forum on dental health

Our reporters
23 February 2007

The Australian Dental Association (ADA) held a public forum last Tuesday on the subject of public dental health services in New South Wales. While the meeting was billed as an opportunity for dental workers and ordinary people to discuss the appalling state of public dental healthcare, the ADA's orientation was centrally focussed on pleading with the Labor and Liberal parties for marginally more funding.

Those in the audience who sought to challenge this perspective and defend the right of ordinary people to free and decent healthcare were denied an opportunity to speak. This included Patrick O'Connor, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the Sydney seat of Marrickville.

The meeting's three featured speakers were Dr. Anthony Burgess, president of the NSW branch of the ADA, Michelle Burrell, acting director of the New South Wales Council of Social Services, and Dr. John Gullotta of the Australian Medical Association. Each speaker described the dental crisis in NSW and Australia and pointed to the shameful level of state and federal government spending.

Dental treatment has effectively been fully privatised under the Howard government, with those unable to afford private health insurance, or the high fees charged by private dentists, forced to forego treatment. The rudimentary public service available at public dental clinics has long been starved of both funding and staff. The state Labor government allocates just \$18 per person per year for public dental services. Moreover, while the waiting list for treatment in NSW is approaching one-quarter of a million people, the public sector employs just 240 dentists.

Increasingly, treatment is being restricted to those

experiencing severe pain and requiring immediate emergency attention. Growing numbers of working class people, including children and youth, are being forced to have their teeth extracted rather than treated. A 2001 study found that 31 percent of people in households earning less than \$20,000 a year had suffered complete tooth loss, compared to 1.3 percent in households with annual incomes above \$40,000. Many cannot even afford to have their teeth extracted, resulting in easily treatable gum disease and tooth decay causing further, sometimes serious, health problems.

While the ADA forum pointed to the deliberate degradation of the public health service by both Labor and Liberal governments, at both federal and state level, none of the three speakers advanced any genuine solution to the crisis. They merely proposed injecting some additional government funds into public dental clinics, while preserving the existing privatised system.

Dr. Gullotta set the tone when he declared: "We need the federal-state buck passing to stop and have a bipartisan co-operative approach to this problem... My plea to you today, and the plea is not to you but to everyone, especially government, I call upon state and federal governments to fill the decay in funding."

Burrell declared that free and decent dental treatment was a social right and that the public system should be no worse than the private sector. However, she continued, it was unlikely that any future government would agree with this, and it was therefore necessary to be "realistic". NCOSS argues for a funding increase of at least \$170 million in NSW. The ADA branch president, Dr. Burgess, argued for a similar increase, which would raise the state's per capita spending on

public dental treatment in line with other Australian states.

In the very short questions and answers session, several dental workers demanded to know why the ADA opposed placing dental treatment under the Medicare public health system. Burgess stated that the organisation did not consider it necessary and that it could create additional problems. This position is consistent with the ADA's acceptance of the government's "free market" framework.

The dentists' association has, for example, encouraged the state government to consider creating Public Private Partnerships in dental care, which would allow corporations to profit from public treatment. It has also advocated allowing private dentists to levy expensive "top up fees" on patients whose treatment is being partially subsidised by public funding.

Time was allocated to the NSW Democrats' politician Arthur Chesterfield-Evans and Jillian Skinner, the Liberal Party's shadow minister for health, both of whom promised additional funding for the dental system and appealed for support in the March 24 state election. The meeting was then closed down after Burgess welcomed both politicians' proposals and called on the state Labor government to do more.

A health and community worker from the western working class suburb of Liverpool stood up and forcefully denounced the format of the meeting, noting that while the two Liberal and Democrat politicians were allowed to address the audience, ordinary workers on "the front line" of the dental crisis were not. The forum moderator failed to respond to the substance of the criticisms, merely claiming there was insufficient time for further discussion.

The suppression of discussion, however, had nothing to do with time constraints. It flowed directly from the political orientation of the ADA, which was clearly demonstrated in the refusal to allow SEP candidate Patrick O'Connor to speak. During question time, the moderator repeatedly shook his head when O'Connor indicated his intention to address the meeting. Later, the organisers denied ever promising O'Connor time to speak.

This act of censorship did not go unnoticed. After the meeting an audience member told O'Connor, "They really didn't want you to speak, did they?" O'Connor went on to outline to a group of community and health

workers from Sydney's western suburbs that what was required was for the working class to break from the existing two-party set-up and fight to build a new mass party based on an internationalist and socialist program, aimed at the complete reorganisation of economic, political, and social life, so that human need, not corporate profit, becomes the guiding principle.

O'Connor also stressed the necessity to rebuild the antiwar movement against the occupation of Iraq and the preparations for an attack on Iran. The candidate received a warm reception and most of the audience took a copy of the party's election statement. One retired worker said he looked forward to attending the SEP's election meetings next week and asked how he could help the campaign.



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