

# Waiting lists force some to take matters in own hands

## DENTAL CARE

By JULIANNE STRACHAN  
State Political Reporter

WAITTS of up to five years for general treatment in the Hunter's public dental system are prompting some patients to take desperate action, charities and doctors say.

Newcastle dentist Paul Coceancig described the waiting lists as "unfathomable," and said he saw five to 10 people a month who had simply given up on the system.

Some of them were referred by local MPs, who asked that he see them, others literally walked in off the street and "begged" for help.

Health Minister Reba Meagher fended off accusations the Government had neglected the dental system yesterday, saying more had been allocated in this year's budget than any other.

But a forum of dental groups, including the Australian Dental Association, was scathing, saying NSW spent about half that of other states - or \$18 per head.

The result was long waiting lists and not enough dentists.

Hunter New England clinical director for oral health Dr



PAUL COCEANCIG

Lanny Chor said the service had about 4500 requests for care each month - more than 60 per cent from the greater Newcastle metropolitan area.

"There are currently two people on the waiting list for urgent dental care causing pain in the Newcastle region. People assessed in this category are generally seen in a timely manner.

"The more urgent conditions are seen promptly while waiting lists do apply for non-urgent and routine care."

But The Samaritans estimated it took up to five years to get general treatment at the Hunter health oral clinic.

Samaritans chief Cec Shevels said in the case of a toothache it was quicker - about a month to see action.

"It would appear that you lose your teeth one by one -

you cannot get them fixed up because there is such a long wait," he said.

Dr Coceancig said he had seen private patients take money on their mortgages or run up credit cards to get care.

Wesley Newcastle City Mission spokesman Tony Scully said the homeless turned to far more drastic measures.

"Some of the people I deal with have mental health issues and drug addictions and their dental concerns can be very bad," he said.

"I have seen clients in a lot of pain, on waiting lists.

"It's a nightmare for them. I have seen people pulling teeth out of their mouths with pliers - I have witnessed it."

Hunter Urban Division of General Practice chief Mark Foster said he had seen people who suffered painful mouth abscess because they couldn't afford dental care.

"They have an abscess, are in a lot of pain and we have to give them antibiotics," Dr Foster said.

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ORDEAL: Mark Dreyer and Jana Horská, who lost their unborn child while waiting for emergency assistance. — Picture by Ben Rushton

need for GPs in the area.

"People have been travelling a fair distance to see a doctor so it's difficult to put an accurate figure on it," Dr El-Sheikh said.

The vacancies were advertised locally for 12 months but were then opened up to the international market after no interest was shown.

but in recent years has focused on general practice.

He will be joined part-time by Dr Pravesh Shah, who is currently working for Tristar at the Wye Medical Clinic, and a part-time nurse.

Dr Ekezie will bulk bill his patients.

— Gabriel Wingate-Pearse

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