

# Election 2022 should address unfinished business in health and aged care

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The 2022 federal election is critical for the health and aged care sectors. Both sectors faced enormous challenges responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both had to change operating models. Both need more support to deal with ongoing impacts.

The Royal Commission on Aged Care Quality and Safety shone a spotlight on poor-quality care, inadequate staffing, a flawed regulatory model, and under-provision of care.<sup>1</sup>

The Australian Government made a welcome investment in aged care in the 2021 Budget,<sup>2</sup> but it has not yet committed to ensuring that people don't wait too long for home care, that a fair wage for aged care workers will be funded, and that the regulatory system will be overhauled to adopt a regional, rights-based model.<sup>3</sup> Both major parties should commit to fixing the aged care mess.

Political complacency about Australia's health system has allowed gaps, which leave many Australians unable to afford needed health care.

The COVID-19 pandemic put additional pressure on hospitals. The Federal Government responded, providing increased support in 2020–2021 by sharing COVID-19 costs 50/50, up from its normal 45% share of the costs of growth. But this support has ended even though the effects of the pandemic have not. The care deficit resulting from deferred care still needs to be addressed. This includes care for people whose elective procedures were deferred (system-deferred care) and the less obvious, but just as real, care deficit for people who didn't see their GP to check a suspicious lump because of fear of going out. Both major parties should commit to continuing the 50/50 cost sharing into 2022 to cover COVID-19-related care deficits.

The most obvious gap in the health system for most Australians is for oral health care.<sup>4</sup> Do we want to live in a community where some can afford timely dental care while others wait in pain, sometimes for more than a year? Poor oral health care can cause poor physical health as well as a host of other problems, such as reduction of employment options. Fixing the dental gap will not happen overnight, but in this election campaign both parties should signal that they recognise the problem, and they should pledge to phase in a universal dental program over the next decade.<sup>4</sup> Part of the funding for a universal dental program might come from a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages.<sup>5</sup>

Another obvious gap is access to medical specialists. Approximately 90% of GP visits are bulk-billed, but less than 50% of medical specialist visits are. Whichever side wins the election should establish bulk-billing specialist clinics, especially in low-income areas where bulk-billing rates are low.<sup>6</sup>

First Nations Australians have worse health status than the rest of us – roughly a decade shorter life expectancy.<sup>7</sup> Addressing the proximate and distal causes of this tragedy must be a national priority.

Finally, a major issue – which crosses all sectors – is climate change. The Federal Government is riddled with climate deniers who have stymied policy action for a decade.<sup>8</sup> Liberal governments in New South Wales and South Australia have been prepared to act on climate, so addressing climate change could and should be bipartisan. This election is a chance for that to happen.

*Stephen Duckett recently completed a decade as Director of the Health and Aged Care Program at Grattan Institute. He is an Honorary Enterprise Professor at the University of Melbourne.*

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