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Opinion Editorial from the Niagara Dental Health Coalition

Ontario Election 2018 – Let’s talk about expanding access to dental care

The Niagara Dental Health Coalition regularly receives phone calls and emails from people in our community experiencing dental infection and pain who urgently need to see a dentist but cannot afford the cost. One recent example was from a self-employed woman living in severe pain who needed tooth extractions and repairs estimated to cost \$5000.00. She had no dental benefits or the means to pay.

In most cases, we cannot help them. Our health system provides great care for most parts of our bodies, but OHIP doesn’t cover the cost of caring for our teeth and gums. Ontario has a public oral healthcare program for low income children, but nothing for the working poor or seniors living in poverty.

It’s election time in Ontario, so let’s talk to our local candidates about the need for an effective public solution to this serious healthcare problem.

An estimated two to three million people across the province don’t visit a dentist each year because of the cost. Too many people experience pain, suffering and difficulty eating or sleeping because they cannot access oral healthcare. Healthcare providers see how this affects people’s overall health, making chronic conditions like cardiovascular and respiratory diseases and diabetes more severe. And we see how it affects employability – you can’t work or look for a job when you’re in constant dental pain or missing front teeth.

We know that many people turn in desperation to a hospital emergency room or doctor’s office when faced with serious tooth pain but they can only get antibiotics and painkillers, not treatment of the actual dental problem. Public healthcare dollars spent on emergency care for dental pain would be better spent on prevention and treatment through public dental programs for people living on low or fixed incomes who lack dental insurance.

As we head toward the June 7 provincial election, now is the time to raise this healthcare issue with our local candidates, when there’s a chance to make a difference. Access to oral healthcare should not be limited only to people with health insurance or the ability to pay.

Today we want to echo the call of the Ontario Oral Health Alliance for the next Ontario government to invest in a public dental program for low income adults and seniors. And let’s ensure that people in need can truly access dental services by enhancing and expanding dental clinics and mobile dental buses at Community Health Centres and Public Health Units, where low income and vulnerable people are welcomed and supported.

With clear solutions within reach, it’s time to ask our local candidates for a commitment: What steps will your party take to address Ontario’s gap in oral healthcare?