

# Teens' teeth rot as Govt and dentists argue

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health reporter

Up to 100,000 teenagers are missing out on taxpayer-funded dental services while the Government and dentists fight over how much the treatment should cost. Experts say teenagers who go untreated risk losing all their teeth by their late 20s.

More than a quarter of dentists - 300 out of 1100 - have quit their contracts to treat adolescents, blaming Government fees for the service as hopelessly inadequate.

A dramatic drop in the number of dental therapists, who generally treat primary school children and organise their transfer to secondary-level care, is contributing to the problem.

The Dental Association is warning of an epidemic of toothlessness, which could lead to a host of other health problems such as stomach ulcers.

Until 1987, up to 90 per cent of teenagers used the free treatment, but this has plummeted to around 60 per cent

An association spokesman, Dr Lawrie Croxson, said young people were risking serious dental problems, particularly if they were in areas without fluoridated water.

Dr Croxson said a cut in dental therapists - formerly dental nurses - to 650 from 1600 had undermined the transfer of youngsters to dentists as they moved



from primary to secondary schools.

The therapists were kept too busy to chase up the paperwork, he said - a point confirmed by the Dental Therapists Association.

But Dr Croxson also said it was human nature for many teen-

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agers to avoid dentists if they could.

The Health Funding Authority says it is extremely con-

cerned about the lack of free checkups. It plans to introduce a national child and adolescent strategy by November after public consultation.

A commercial analyst at the authority, Ruth Stannard, said it wanted more capitation schemes under which dentists were paid a set annual amount for each teenage patient to cover any dental work the teenager needed.

Supporters of this scheme, used already in Northland, Palmerston North and some parts of Auckland, say it would place the emphasis on prevention rather than cure, because paying out to fix rotten teeth would cost the dentist more in the long run.

Ruth Stannard said the numbers of youngsters visiting dentists had already increased 34 per cent in South Auckland in a year, thanks to the capitation scheme.

But the Dental Association wants to retain and boost significantly the existing system of fees based on the costs of fillings and other procedures•