

Dentists tell New Brunswick government to put its money where its mouth is

Presently in NB, clients of Social Development (SD) who have dental coverage are able to see a dentist for basic services and the dentist bills the province for payment. The payment rate is based on a contract between SD and the New Brunswick Dental Society (NBDS) which expired in March 2011. For years, the province has been compensating dentists on average less than 69% of our usual fees. Some of the more common procedures such as extractions and fillings for children, are reimbursed at less than 50%. In an environment where dental office overhead can run up to between 60 and 70%, participation in the contract under its current terms means dentists are being forced to operate at a loss. Reimbursement to New Brunswick dentists is the lowest in the Atlantic provinces. In fact, New Brunswick dentists have been subsidizing the program by just over \$2 million dollars annually.

Last Spring, our members directed us to seek a new, more equitable contract. In August, after months of discussions with the province, the NBDS felt we had arrived at a compromise: dentists would continue to subsidize the program but, in return, compensation would gradually increase to 83% by 2013. Unfortunately, Cabinet rejected the proposal. In November, after no significant improvement in negotiations, the NBDS gave 30-days' notice that the contract would terminate on December 21.

Further meetings with Ministers Stulz and Higgs resulted in recommendations that NBDS felt would allow for cost containment while still providing acceptable service to patients. During these discussions, the concept of a co-payment in two specific instances, was considered. NBDS felt that an elective co-payment option would work for certain situations where the adult patient could pay a portion of the cost of a filling, and have the benefit of maintaining his or her teeth versus the consequence of extractions and loss of teeth.

Following numerous meetings and emails between the NBDS, the Department of Social Development, and the Finance Minister, we believed that we had an agreement in principle for two years which would not cost the government any additional money and on that basis, and NBDS agreed in good faith to postpone the contract termination date for an additional 30 days to January 21st 2012.. We were led to believe the proposal had the support of Minister Higgs.

However, on January 10th, to our complete surprise, the government presented a "take it or leave it" proposal which applied a 20% co-payment to ALL services for income assistance recipients. In addition, the government coverage decreased from just under 69% to 56%.

The government's proposal to expect SD clients to pay for emergencies involving pain and for restoring children's teeth is extremely unfair. The government's plan to place the burden of paying for dental care on the backs of those who struggle to afford basic essentials, is completely unacceptable. By introducing co-payments for all services, government is creating a significant barrier to care for those in pain, who will have nowhere else to go but to the hospital emergency department. It will be the poorest of the poor who will suffer as a result.

The NBDS will not agree to this latest proposal. After January 21st, members of the NBDS will still treat clients of SD just as they do any other patient. Clients can pay up front for service and then be reimbursed by SD or they can make arrangements with their social worker for payment to the dentist at the time of treatment. Dentists will no longer bill the government directly under the terms of the old contract. We regret that if no agreement is reached with government by January 21st, income assistance recipients will have to pay for their services up front; however, the NBDS can simply not agree to this latest proposal.

It is not too late for the New Brunswick government to return to the table with an offer that is not designed at the expense of the poor or relying on the charitable nature of dentists. A fairly-negotiated contract should include a model that reimburses dentists in a fair and equitable manner, and allows Social Development clients to be able to access necessary services. We are open to continued discussion however we will not entertain any further proposal which would add an additional financial burden to those who are least able to afford it.

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