



FASTFACTS



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“HEALTHY SMILES, HEALTHY KIDS?” Let’s Get Preventive Dental Care Back into the Schools!

According to recent media reports, there is a huge backlog of children requiring dental surgery in Manitoba. Mia Robson of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, for example, reported May 16 (“Kids’ dental work delay blasted”) that “there are now over 1,000 kids waiting [for dental surgery], and kids without urgent problems often wait more than a year.”

The Manitoba Progressive Conservative party insists that the government utilize the services of private clinics to reduce the numbers of children on waiting lists, and waiting times. The NDP government has rejected the Conservative Party position and opted instead to increase the number of surgeries performed in public hospitals.

The government’s response is the appropriate one. However, it is at best a short-term solution; it does not get to the root of the problem. We need to *prevent* the cycle of crisis and emergency response by establishing a comprehensive preventive program that will address the dental needs of children, and drastically reduce the demand for surgery. We need to do this not only to prevent the pain and suffering caused by tooth decay and related diseases, but also to improve the overall health of our population and alleviate the pressures on health care resources (see, for example, Andre Picard, “Painful dental bills hurt health care,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 5, 2004).

Manitoba did at one time have just such a program. It started in the 1970s and survived into the 1990s.

Manitoba’s Experience with a Comprehensive Preventive Dental Care Program

In 1976, a Schreyer-led NDP government established a dental health care program using dental nurses for children in rural schools. The program was inspired by the recognition that children with poor dental health were handicapped in their ability to participate effectively in the school system. There was also evidence that poor childhood dental health was carried into adulthood and contributed to absentee and sickness problems in their work and other aspects of their lives.

The program was initially restricted to rural areas with services delivered through the schools by dental nurses supported by dental assistants. Offices were maintained in rural centres such as Dauphin, Melita and Souris, and four to six week clinics were provided in schools in the service areas. At these clinics, staff examined children six to fourteen years of age and provided them with basic treatments including cleaning, x-rays and fillings. Children with problems outside the jurisdiction of the dental health nurses were referred to dentists, and they were covered by the program. Education about proper dental care and oral health was a major part of the program.

In April 1984, the then Howard Pawley- led NDP government announced that the dental program in schools would be expanded to include Brandon, Portage la Prairie and Winnipeg. The plan called for coverage for children aged six to eight starting in 1985 and coverage for all children six to fourteen by 1987.



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The extension to urban centres was based on a compromise arrangement—to placate dentists who were opposed to the dental nurses' program—that was worked out between the government and the Manitoba Dental Association. This agreement stipulated that children in Brandon would be covered under the nurses' program while children in Winnipeg and Portage la Prairie would receive services in dentists' offices through a plan administered by the Manitoba Dental Association.

Shortly after the announcement of the program's expansion, Brandon East MLA Len Evans told the media that this was "the first step toward universal dental care. 'It's the beginning of universal dental service for all young people in Manitoba...The next step will be to extend it through the balance of the population'" (*Brandon Sun*, April 17, 1984).

As it turned out, Evan's vision would not be realized. The extension of the program for children to urban centers floundered in Brandon. There was overwhelming support for a dental program among parents and others in the area. However, some dentists opposed the program because they feared a loss of business, and there was also opposition from the Brandon School Board, which insisted that Brandon get the same program as Winnipeg, i.e., a program using dentists rather than dental nurses.

When the Brandon School Division voted to reject the plan in Brandon, the then Health Minister, Larry Desjardins, shelved the expansion plan. The Pawley government was overtaken by other events so the issue was not addressed again during its tenure in office.

Filmon's Conservatives Sacrifice Children's Dental Program to Deficit Reduction

Manitoba's Progressive Conservatives have never really understood the concept of public-sector investment in people as a means not only to improve the lives of individuals and their families and better society, but also to support economic development. When the Filmon government became obsessed with the twin goals of deficit reduction and tax breaks for business and the relatively well-off, they turned to cuts in social welfare to finesse their program.

In April 1993, Clayton Manness, Finance Minister, with the support of Don Orchard, Health Minister, announced that the Children's Dental Program would be eliminated to save \$4.2 million. This resulted in the redundancy of 60 employees – dental nurses and dental assistants – and stripped 60,000 rural school children of their dental cover-

age. At a meeting organized by the Dental Auxiliaries Association, Orchard showed his contempt for concerned parents and employees in the program with his suggestion that the government would consider maintaining the program if parents agreed to pay the costs.

Isn't It Time We Started to Have Visions Of A Better Future Again?

The NDP governments that introduced in the 1970s, and then sought to expand the Children's' dental care program in the 1980s, had big visions about how to improve conditions for most Manitobans. Their ultimate objective was to bring dental care under the umbrella of Medicare, as was recommended by Justice Emmett Hall in the 1960s.

A Conservative government with no vision killed the program in the 1990s. We are paying the price for that myopic decision in the form of increasing numbers of kids requiring dental surgeries in Manitoba.

It's time we started to think big again when it comes to the welfare of our citizens and our children. We need to re-launch a Children's' Dental Care Program. Is the present NDP government up to it?

- Errol Black

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