

Cancer patients wait for facial prosthetics funding ahead of election



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ABC Illawarra

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Tracey David is calling for federal health funding for facial prostheses. (ABC South East NSW: Floss Adams)

In short:

Head and Neck Cancer Australia wants the major parties to commit to fund facial prostheses for cancer patients ahead of the May election.

The organisation submitted a plan for a \$13 million fund in October to bring financial support for patients needing facial prostheses after cancer surgery in line with other prosthetic recipients.

What's next?

The federal government says a current review of prostheses programs to identify gaps in coverage is due to be completed by July.

Tracey David has a simple message for the politicians and bureaucrats who have so far refused to approve funding for her prosthetic nose.

"We are not cosmetic, we are not looking to enhance our face. We are looking to live with dignity," she said.

The New South Wales south coast grandmother received life-saving surgery to remove a malignant tumour from her face last year but was disappointed to learn there was no federal funding to help her cover the cost of a prosthetic.

"We desperately need the funding for head and neck cancer, for all people who need prostheses," she said.

Ms David received a one-off payment through a NSW charity based at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, but said that funding would not last.

"What do I do in two to three years time when I need a new nose?" she said.

"It's only plastic — it gets dirty, it needs to be cleaned. They don't last long.

"So there you go, there's another \$6–7,000."

Cancer patients like Ms David are still waiting for answers ahead of the federal election.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia, which represents a relatively small number of patients seeking public funding to bring them into line with other prosthetic recipients, has been unable to secure a commitment before the May 3 election.

This is despite a 2024 Senate inquiry into rare cancers making it clear these patients were not being supported in accessing rehabilitation options.

Funding anxiety

Sydney pensioner Paolo Abate had his nose removed in an operation 10 years ago due to cancer.

He received funding through a Sydney Dental Hospital service but has now been told the funding is no longer available, causing him great anxiety.



Paolo Abate has a prosthetic nose but cannot fund a replacement. (Supplied: Paolo Abate)

"I am a pensioner. You can understand what life is like at the moment with the way things are going, so for me to save \$5,000, it's a struggle," Mr Abate said.

"I think it would be the best thing if it was covered by Medicare. It would be great."

"Because without a prosthesis I can't get out of the house. People without a nose, they don't look great.

"We scare people."

Seeking a political solution

Head and Neck Cancer Australia chief executive Nadia Rosen said even after the federal government had completed a review of funding, due later this year, there were no guarantees.

"We need it to happen sooner rather than later," she said.

"For people like Tracey and Paolo, some of our patients who are missing their nose, they are already living with devastating facial disfigurement and waiting any longer is simply not acceptable.



Nadia Rosen wants equity in prosthetics access.
(Supplied: Nadia Rosen)

"We have asked for a very modest investment of around \$13 million a year for people who are literally needing part of their face replaced.

"We have also provided the government and the opposition literally with a costed shovel-ready program that is based on the already existing breast prosthesis program."

Health Minister Mark Butler said the federal government launched an independent review into the availability of prostheses programs to identify gaps in coverage.

He said the review was expected to be completed in July.

"I will be working closely with patients and consumer groups to improve access to the healthcare services they need and deserve," he said.



Liberal senator Wendy Askew said she and Shadow Health Minister Anne Ruston had been briefed by Head and Neck Cancer Australia about its proposal for providing prosthetics to those in need.

Mark Butler says an independent prostheses programs review is underway. (ABC News)

"During last year's Senate inquiry into rare cancers, it became clear that many patients are not being supported in accessing these rehabilitation options and that improvements need to be made," Senator Askew said.

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