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DATE: May 11, 2009

REPORT TITLE: **REGION OF PEEL'S LOW-INCOME SENIORS' DENTAL PROGRAM UPDATE**

FROM: Janette Smith, Commissioner of Health Services  
 David L. Mowat, MBChB, MPH, FRCPC, Medical Officer of Health

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### RECOMMENDATION

**That a one-time treatment plan, with a maximum (upper limit) of \$2000 per senior life-time eligibility for dental and denture care, to be used within a specified timeframe be implemented.**

**And further, that the Regional Chair urges the Minister of Health Promotion and Peel MPPs to immediately release and implement the remaining portion of the \$135 million funding for dental care among low-income families as promised in the 2008 provincial budget.**

### REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- As directed by Regional Council, the Region of Peel's Low-Income Seniors' Dental Program was launched on October 30, 2008 with a notice to all Peel dentists and a media release.
- Approximately 1100 seniors were screened and found to be eligible for the program within the first three weeks of operation.
- There are now almost 3000 seniors on the waiting list for the program.
- Implementation of any of the proposed options, with the current budget, will not eradicate the waiting list in the short-term due to the large number of seniors already on the list.
- Similarly resource gaps impede the ability to achieve compliance with the children's dental program mandate which is exacerbated by on-going community growth and the current economic climate.
- Peel Public Health is seeking direction from Regional Council regarding the future implementation of the Seniors' Dental Program in 2009 and beyond.

### DISCUSSION

#### 1. Background

Regional Council directed Public Health staff to budget \$0.6 million in 2008 for a 100 per-cent Regionally funded low-income seniors' dental program to be initiated in the second half of 2008. The annualized budget of \$1.2 million was approved in the 2009 budget.

Subsequently, Resolution RCB-2009-6 was adopted at Regional Council Budget on January 14, 2009 to carry forward approximately \$0.5 million unallocated 2008 funding in the Region

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of Peel Seniors' Dental Program to the 2009 Seniors' Dental Program, as part of the year-end surplus management process.

In addition, as directed by Council, a series of consultations on the Seniors' Dental Program were held with the Halton-Peel Dental Association (HPDA) and the Ontario Dental Association (ODA). In these meetings, a Licensing Agreement for use of the codes and descriptors that Ontario dentists use to define dental services was developed. As well, input was given on the list of dental services to be included in the Seniors' Dental Program. Following a series of meetings and communications in 2007-08 a Licensing Agreement was executed in October 2008 and the program was launched.

**2. Current Situation and Implications**

To launch the Region of Peel's Low-Income Seniors' Dental Program, a Schedule or list of eligible services and fees for dentists was mailed to every dentist practicing in Peel Region with an introductory letter to the program from the Medical Officer of Health. Two hundred seniors, who had been on a waiting list for the program, were notified of its initiation and a media release was issued on October 30, 2008.

Seniors may qualify for this program if they:

- Do not have dental insurance or other forms of coverage;
- Are 65 years of age or older;
- Reside in the Region of Peel, and
- Sign a declaration that they cannot afford to pay for the necessary dental care. The declaration does state that they may be required to provide proof of financial need.

<b>Current Statistics</b>	
Total number of seniors issued a claim form for treatment	1,085
Total number of seniors treated AND claims submitted from October 2008 to May 2009*	512
Total number of seniors applying for program on waiting list	2,978
Average cost per claim to date**	\$1,374
Number of seniors added to waiting list per week	75-100/week

\* This number includes seniors who may still have further claims to be submitted, i.e. dental work completed but still waiting to get dentures. This number does not include seniors who have had treatment but a claim has not yet been submitted.

\*\* This amount is based on actual claims received – the majority of which are dental claims. As denturist claims are being submitted for payment, the average cost per claim is rising.

**a) Program Cost**

As anticipated, we observed a strong response to the launch of the program. The high level of program uptake was attributable to the existing need for dental care in Peel's low-income senior population and financial challenges experienced by seniors as a result of the recent economic downturn.

Currently, dental providers are required to seek approval from Peel Public Health for certain procedures and/or when the treatment costs exceed a pre-determined

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amount of \$900 per person per episode. This amount was determined by reviewing programs in other jurisdictions and through input from the ODA/HPDA. To date, it has been observed that most claims exceed this limit and the current average cost is actually close to \$1400 per claim. At this point in time it would appear that the \$1.7 million designated for the 2009 program year will be utilized by the existing 1,085 seniors who have been issued a claim form for treatment and will not cover costs for the approximate 3000 seniors on the waiting list, or for those who will continue to apply for the program in the future. However, should there be any remaining funds in the 2009 budget, seniors on the waiting list will begin to be served.

With the current program design and average cost per claim to date, it is estimated that it would cost an additional \$4 million to pay for treatment for the approximate 3000 seniors already on the waiting list which continues to grow by 75 each week.

With the current base budget, options to treat as many seniors as possible while still providing costs for basic dental treatment are:

Change eligibility:

- (i) Tighten eligibility criteria, i.e. setting an arbitrary income or age limit.
- (ii) Require applicants to produce proof of income during the screening process. Similar eligibility reviews for the Children in Need of Treatment (CINOT) program were found to be resource intensive and found very few ineligible clients.

Reduce per-claim costs:

- (i) Remove dentures from the list of eligible services. About half of all claimants need dentures. Not completing the full course of treatment by omitting dentures would negatively affect dental function as the intent of the program is to restore function, i.e. to ensure that seniors can eat properly.
- (ii) Implement a one-time treatment plan with an upper limit of \$2000 for dental treatment requiring dentures and an upper limit of \$900 for dental treatment not requiring dentures. It would be extremely difficult to track the allocation of funds among the different providers (i.e. dentists, denturists and hygienists) that may become involved in the progression of a client's treatment plan. It would also generate additional administrative demands and hence, require additional funds from the budget be used for administration rather than dental care.
- (iii) Implement a limit of \$2,000 per course of treatment per life-time. This would be non-cumulative, i.e. if the first course of treatment is lower than this amount, the balance cannot be claimed later. With a base budget of \$1.2 million, a range of 600-800 seniors per year will be admitted into the program. This is the most efficient option administratively both for Peel Public Health and for oral health care providers, and would also be more equitable. Continuing with the status quo means dealing with a large number of claims that need review and approval which increases the administrative costs and time to process a claim and ultimately delays the delivery of service to a senior.

Implementation of any of the proposed above options will not eradicate the waiting list in 2009 due to the large number of seniors already on the list; rather,

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it will provide a course of action to extend funds to serve as many seniors as possible in the 2010 base budget and beyond.

The current trend shows that seniors being added to the waiting list is slowing from 100 to 75 per week. However, it is not possible to predict with the on-going economic downturn how many seniors will apply to the program this year or subsequent years.

**b) Status on Provincial Dental Care Plan for Low-Income Families.**

Peel Public Health's dental program has made an important contribution to improving the health of those seniors who have received treatment. However, the program only fills a small portion of a very large gap in dental care for low-income citizens. The overwhelming response for services within the Region of Peel is indicative of the tremendous need for dental services for low-income seniors throughout the province of Ontario. Peel Health staff has been actively involved in advocating for further provincial support. To date, Peel Health has worked in collaboration with the Ontario Association of Public Health Dentistry, Peel Poverty Action Group and the Toronto Oral Health Coalition to advocate for provincial funding, and written two letters to Premier Dalton McGuinty to urge the Province to accelerate the release of funds for the dental care plan. More advocacy efforts are required to ensure the provincial government release all of the \$135 million committed to oral health care as part of the Province's 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy.

**c) Service Providers**

As directed by Regional Council, Peel Public Health staff consulted with the Ontario Dental Association and Halton-Peel Dental Association and, as a result, dentists were the first oral health care providers to have an agreement with the Region to provide the program. Subsequently, the Denturist Association of Ontario and the Ontario Dental Hygienists Association have finalized agreements for use of their specific lists of eligible codes and descriptors. As of January 15, 2009 seniors have been able to receive care from a dentist, denturist or hygienist of their choice to obtain oral health services that fall within the professionals' specified scope of practice.

To receive feedback and monitor the program, Peel Public Health staff plans to meet triannually with the ODA/HPDA. The first of these meetings was held March 6, 2009. Data on number of seniors, services delivered, service costs, best use of funding and issues related to program delivery with oral health care providers were reviewed. The ODA/HPDA were consulted on options to address program demand and advised that a report to Council would be scheduled to determine the direction of the program.

**PROPOSED DIRECTION**

Given the knowledge gained from the delivery of the Seniors' Dental Program to date and from consultation with the ODA/HPDA, Peel Health is recommending the following changes for Regional Council to consider in utilizing the available funds amongst as many seniors as possible while still providing basic treatment:

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1. Implement a one-time treatment plan with a maximum (upper limit) of \$2000 per senior life-time eligibility for dental and denture care to be used within a specified timeframe.
2. Communicate to the Province to advocate for the release of the remainder of the \$135 million that the provincial government has committed to the low-income dental care plan by highlighting Peel's Seniors' Dental Program as an example of the need for dental services for low-income seniors across Ontario.

Health staff will continue to monitor this program and keep Council informed of the related budget and implementation issues. It should be noted that due to on-going community growth and the current economic climate, there also continues to be a short-fall in resources in order to achieve compliance with Peel Public Health's current children's dental program mandate. Peel Public Health will be tabling a report to Council highlighting the extent of service gaps with the new Public Health Standards in the near future.

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Council has approved the annualized budget of \$1.2 million for the Seniors' Dental Program in 2009. Approximately \$0.5 million unallocated funding from 2008 will be carried forward. A total budget of \$1.7 million has been approved to serve 1085 seniors in 2009.

**CONCLUSION**

The Region of Peel low-income Seniors' Dental Program has been successfully launched and well received among seniors. Direction from Council regarding the program's further implementation in 2009 and beyond is requested.




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**Approved for Submission:**



D. Szwarc, Chief Administrative Officer

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