**TORONTO STAR**

**Liberals offer new drug and dental coverage for Ontarians without health plans at work**

Adding to a new OHIP+ pharmacare plan and the existing Healthy Smiles aid for low-income families, the promised Ontario Drug and Dental Program would reimburse 80 per cent of eligible prescription drug and dental expenses.

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Ontarians lacking workplace health insurance will get up to $700 a year to defray the cost of medicines and dentist visits starting in summer 2019 under the Wynne government’s pre-election [budget](http://budget.ontario.ca/2018/index.html).

Augmenting a new OHIP+ pharmacare plan and the existing Healthy Smiles aid for needy families, the promised Ontario Drug and Dental Program would reimburse 80 per cent of eligible prescription drug and dental expenses, Finance Minister Charles Sousa said Wednesday.

But there are annual maximum payouts of $400 for singles, $600 for couples and $700 for a family of four with two children, prompting the Ontario Dental Association to warn the program “does not take meaningful action for kids from low-income families” given that $121 million in annual funding for Healthy Smiles is not keeping up with demand.

“The caps are so low,” added Natalie Mehra of the Ontario Health Coalition. “It looks like what they tried to do is the cheapest version that was possible.”

The drug and dental plan — in the wake of a [$1.2 billion NDP denticare proposal](https://www.thestar.com/news/queenspark/2018/03/19/andrea-horwath-unveils-12b-public-dental-plan.html) unveiled two weeks ago — comes with a price tag of $500 million annually to the provincial treasury, contributing to annual government deficits forecast until 2025.

“One in four people of working age in Ontario does not have access to an extended health benefits plan,” Sousa said in his budget speech, which placed heavy emphasis on Liberal pledges to make life more “affordable” with an election coming June 7.

“Their kids may not have the dental care they require … families forgo medicines they find too expensive to buy.”

Details of the program, one of the few surprises in a budget largely telegraphed in advance, are yet to be worked out.

It’s in addition to OHIP+, which began covering 4,400 prescription medicines for Ontarians under 25 in January and will be expanded to seniors 65 and over starting in August 2019. The Healthy Smiles program now covers basic dental care for children such as checkups, cleanings and fillings in families with net incomes below $23,000.

There will be no income threshold for the new drug and dental program, meaning anyone without a workplace health and dental plan can apply for reimbursement, although government officials said they expect the take-up from higher-income workers will be low because most have coverage through their employers.

New Democrat Leader Andrea Horwath, who has promised a public denticare plan that would be free for anyone earning less than $30,000 a year, said the Liberal drug and dental effort falls “way short” of what Ontarians need.

“This is not universal dental care,” she told reporters.

The NDP plan would require employers who do not provide dental benefits to their staff to “step up to the plate” and share the cost of services with employees while seniors and people on provincial disability pensions and social assistance could get dental treatment using their OHIP cards, Horwath said.

She criticized the payout maximums under the Liberal plan as too low and forcing people under tight budgets to pay dentists first and get reimbursements from the government later.

Progressive Conservative Leader Doug Ford said the raft of spending promises in the budget shows “the Liberals think they can buy your vote” and insisted Ontarians “will be stuck with the bill for Kathleen Wynne’s election promises.”