

Ministers pedalling ‘magic beans’ on NHS 111 claims

As new figures from the Labour Party indicate five million people called NHS 111 with dental problems in the last five years, the British Dental Association has stressed many callers will not have secured needed care.

The professional body has warned there is no reliable data on how these calls translate into appointments, and has said ministers must stop portraying NHS 111 or NHS.uk as ‘easy’ solutions to secure access to care.

The BDA says the repeat claims made by ministers are consistently at odds with the lived experience of millions of patients.

Health Minister Maria Caulfield told GMB on 20 March that ‘we have a website you can type in your postcode it will show you where your nearest NHS dentist is. If you go on now there are significantly more dentists seeing NHS patients. I would encourage people to go on to our NHS website and type in your postcode and it will show you your nearest dentist

that’s being updated on a regular basis and from my experience of helping my own constituents.’

At the time just one practice in Caulfield’s Lewes constituency was listed as taking on new patients, but had a backlog, with no space for appointments till the second week of April. Secretary of State for Health Victoria Atkins told the Health and Social Care Committee on 13 December: ‘If you are able to use the NHS app – or the 111 helpline in the most rural areas, where we have put in a little bit of extra funding, such as the South West – you can find other dentists and go to them.’

Almost the entire South West was and remains a ‘dental desert’ for new adult NHS patients.

Government data shows unmet need for dentistry is now at 1 in 4 of England’s adult population – over 12m people.

The recent ‘Recovery Plan’ for NHS dentistry was dubbed ‘unworthy of the title’ by the BDA. A recent poll of dentists

in England by the BDA showed just 3% think the plan will result in their practice seeing more NHS patients. 43% believe the plan will actually lead to their practice seeing fewer NHS patients. Only 1% of respondents believe the plan is capable of meeting the government’s stated objective to provide NHS dental care to ‘all who need it’.

The Secretary of State has had to correct the official record after informing parliament the plan was funded by £200m in ‘new’ money. It is entirely funded by recycling underspends in the service’s £3bn budget, which has barely increased in a decade.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: ‘What this data can’t tell you is how many callers walked away with an appointment. Ministers keep telling desperate patients to hit the phones or the NHS website and all will be well. On access to care the reality is Government is offering magic beans, not silver bullets.’

Three new programmes launched to improve the oral health of Cornish children

Cornwall Council, Smile Together Dental CIC and Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise have teamed up to improve the oral health of children across the county with three new programmes.

It comes as figures reveal an 83% increase in the number of caries-related tooth extractions in hospital for 0-to-19-year-olds compared to the previous year 2020/2011.

The first programme, Smarter Smiles, will provide Oral Health Education and a Fluoride Varnish programme as well as an accreditation scheme for schools and nurseries in areas of high decay across Cornwall, championing a ‘whole-school’ approach to oral health promotion and prevention.

Smarter Smiles builds on the legacy of the successful Brighter Smiles oral health programme which delivered toothbrushing clubs, fluoride varnishing and oral health education to around 6,500 children each year.

The Smarter Smiles combined oral health promotion team will not only continue this work with young children but complement it by making a sustainable difference to

the oral health of children and adults with additional needs.

The second new programme, named First Dental Steps, will see the council’s Health Visitors support families with tooth-brushing for 9–12-month-old babies, and the third will see free oral health packs distributed to every two-year-old in the county, estimated to be around 7,500 children, thanks to the generous support of Smile Together and Go Cornwall Bus Company.

The three schemes combine to form an integrated oral health pathway to give children the best possible start in life.

Cllr Dr Andy Virr, Cabinet Member for Public Health at Cornwall Council, said: ‘Extraction of teeth because of tooth decay continues to be the most common reason for hospital admission in children aged 6 to 10 years. This is preventable and oral health is an important aspect of a child’s overall health status and their school readiness and their ability to learn and develop.

‘It could not be a better time for our partnership to launch this critical oral health pathway to support the oral health of

Cornish children from nine months to five years and enable even earlier interventions.’

Alison Cane, Outreach Manager at Smile Together said: ‘Since 2015, Cornwall Council and Smile Together have co-funded the delivery of Brighter Smiles, Cornwall’s oral health programme, which has seen our outreach team engaging with thousands of children each year. Delivering this expanded Smarter Smiles oral health programme will positively influence the oral health of thousands more children and adults most in need across Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.’

Mark Collins, Commercial Director at Go South West, said: ‘Recognising the importance of children’s oral health we were keen to become an oral health supporter. As we provide a comprehensive network of bus services throughout Cornwall, we wanted something with county-wide impact so this opportunity to ensure an oral health pack reaches every two-year-old is perfect, filling the gap between First Dental Steps and Smarter Smiles to ensure there is a smooth oral health pathway for every child from 9 months through to 5 years.’