Marmot Review should come as no surprise

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A decade on from Fair Society Healthy Lives (The Marmot Review), Professor Sir Michael Marmot's *The Marmot Review: 10 Years On* – not about a relatively large ground squirrel in the genus *Marmota*, I may add – most likely took no-one by surprise.

The report's denouncement that in England the government has not taken the opportunity to improve people's lives and life chances over the last 10 years, with life expectancy having stalled for the first time in more than 100 years and people living for more years in poor health.

According to the foreword, 'rising child poverty and the closure of children's centres, to declines in education funding, an increase in precarious work and zero hours contracts, to a housing affordability crisis and a rise in homelessness, to people with insufficient money to lead a healthy life and resorting to food banks in large numbers, to ignored communities with poor conditions and little reason for hope ... Austerity will cast a long

shadow over the lives of the children born and growing up under its effects'.¹

As shocking as this and the associated statistics may be, dentists will be far from shocked.

While the Marmot Review did not specifically mention dentistry, the parallels are clear and stark. It paints a depressing picture, but perhaps unsurprising picture given the large and widespread cuts to local authorities' budgets over the last decade. These cuts have varied across the country, falling the hardest on areas where needs are higher. Take Sure Start centres. 'Unprecedented' cuts have hit children who need the services the most. Sound familiar? Starting Well, England's dedicated oral health initiative aimed at improving oral health incomes for high risk children, receives no new funding.

In 2019 a Parliamentary question raised by Peter Dowd MP found the government's spend per head of population on high street services had hit a new low. The equivalent of nearly £42 per head was set aside by the government to cover dental care for every adult and child in England at the outset of the Coalition Government in 2010, falling by over £12 in real terms in 2017/18, a 29% fall.

In that time budgets have failed to keep pace with inflation and population growth of three million, and as state contributions have fallen, patients have been asked to contribute ever more through NHS charges. Charge levels have increased by over 30% since 2010, and now account for almost 30% of the total budget for NHS dentistry. The total NHS dental budget is currently sufficient to cover care for around half the English population.

The Marmot Review also touched upon the different quality of life experienced by those in the north and those in the south. Again, we know about this. In 2017, the Nuffield Trust and the Health Foundation published a report highlighting a north/south and rich/poor divide. The report identified that on the whole, dental health was better in the south and east of England, and poorer in the north of England: for example, children in Blackburn were four times more likely to have missing, decayed or filled teeth than children in South Gloucestershire. Those regional variations were partly explained by larger issues regarding levels of deprivation and the impact that this has on people's dental health, something that clearly has not changed.

And all through the decade, oral health has improved. To do so against a backdrop of reduced funding, widening inequalities and increased patient charges. Imagine if the service had received the funding it needs and England had an effective child oral health programme like their Welsh and Scottish counterparts. Imagine if the current dental contract allowed for time with patients without penalising the profession for missing their targets. Imagine if dentistry as a profession was attractive enough not to be in the midst of a staffing crisis.

The Review finished off by recommending that the Prime Minister initiated an 'ambitious and world-leading health inequalities strategy'. It would be foolish for the Government – particularly on the heels of the unfinished Health and Social Care Committee Inquiry into dentistry – to overlook the profession. But, should it happen, I suspect few will be truly surprised.

Reference

1. Institute of Health Equity. Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On. Available online at: <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/about-us/the-institute-of-health-equity/our-current-work/collaborating-with-the-health-foundation-> (Accessed February 2020).

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