

Dentists: Government holds the key to restore services to millions

The BDA has told the Department of Health and Social Care and all devolved administrations that a package of capital funding now offers the only hope of restoring routine services to millions of patients, as a new survey indicates a service in crisis is incapable of delivering investment to meet new rules that could boost access.

In an open letter to Health Secretary Matt Hancock, and raised with each devolved government, the BDA has set out the case for urgent support.

According to survey data from practices across the UK:

- 70% of practices are now operating at less than half their pre-pandemic capacity, with nearly two thirds (63%) reporting less focus on 'routine' dentistry, as urgent and emergency cases receive needed priority
- The number one barrier to increasing capacity is 'fallow time' – the time gap mandated between procedures to minimise risks of viral transmission – with 88% of practices reporting it as a major obstacle. PPE availability – formerly the key challenge – is now cited by 36% of practices as supplies have improved. Financial and cash flow problems are cited by 62% of practices, and patients' unwillingness to attend by 43%
- While new regulations may enable practices to slash their fallow time, most practices (57%) now lack the funds to invest in the new equipment required to do so. Industry sources estimate costs for mechanical ventilation for meeting required levels of 'air change' at £10,000 for a typical practice. 52% of practices also lack data on air change levels to even establish their compliance with new rules

→ At present 55% of practices estimate they are able to maintain their financial sustainability for 12 months or less.

Between the March lockdown and September in England over 14.5 million fewer treatments were delivered in 2020 compared to the same period last year – a figure the BDA now estimate to have reached 19 million. With practices remaining open during the current lockdown, dentists have stressed the focus remains on managing an unprecedented backlog of urgent cases, often limiting scope for essential routine dentistry, particularly in NHS care.

The BDA has warned of widening inequality, as patients face poorer outcomes given the huge barriers to early detection of conditions from decay and gum disease through to oral cancer.

It has been over a decade since dentists in England received any capital investment from central government. The BDA has estimated government would rapidly recoup costs through increased patient contributions as a result of rising patient volumes. Since lockdown the Treasury has lost nearly £400 million from the patient contributions that are increasingly relied upon to fund NHS services in England, with around £50m in revenues now being lost per month.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'COVID-19 restrictions have left dentists firefighting with huge backlogs, unable to see more than a fraction of our former patient numbers, especially in the NHS.'

'We now face a Catch-22. New rules could bring back a dose of normality, but come with a multi-million-pound bill for new kit that practices simply cannot afford.'

'On paper we have a chance to restore services to millions, but without support from Government it won't translate into better access. The clock is ticking on an oral health time bomb, as dentists lose the chance to act on the early signs of decay and oral cancer.'

'Ministers have a choice. Make an investment that would pay for itself and bring millions back through our doors, or leave patients waiting for the care they need.'

Generous research grants available to BSPD members



Two grants of up to £10,000 are available to members of BSPD looking for pump-priming funds for research projects focused on the oral health of children. The deadline for submission of an application for a joint FDS RCSEng BSPD grant is 29 January 2021.

In order to apply, you must be a member of BSPD and have developed a research project which relates to children's oral health in the broadest sense. Applicants do not have to be a member of the FDS RCSEng but would be expected to join for the duration of the grant.

In 2020, Laura Timms, an academic clinical fellow based at the University of Sheffield School of Dentistry, was successful in her application for pump-priming funds. She was awarded £5,460 to support background research into a video to be made by and for children, explaining the Silver Diamine Fluoride technique.

Chris Vernazza, BSPD's academic lead, commented: 'Having good quality evidence is key to the Society's mission of improving the oral health of children in the UK and so we are delighted to be working with RCS England's Faculty of Dental Surgery to support research. The grants offer an ideal opportunity to undertake a small project, hopefully leading on to further research and so we would encourage anyone with great ideas to apply.'

For more information visit www.rcseng.ac.uk/dental-faculties/fds/research/fds-pump-priming-grants/#fdsbspd

© Africalimages/E+/Getty Images Plus

© Luis Alvarez/DigitalVision/Getty Images Plus

