The need for innovation in North Wales

Peter Greensmith and
Rebecca Hollinshead

North Wales Dental Academy

Shortfall in NHS dental access, issues around recruitment and retention, and difficulty attracting both newly qualified and established dentists.

These issues are common across UK dentistry however, at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) in North Wales they have had a big impact over the past few years, resulting in a gap in service provision,

following the loss of practices in Anglesey, Gwynedd and Conwy.

To address this, BCUHB are working in partnership with Health Education Improvement Wales, Bangor University and Welsh Government, progressing plans to introduce a North Wales Dental Academy in Bangor. The vision is to increase access to primary dental care, be a focus for improving the quality and delivery of NHS dental services and boost the number and skillset of dentists and dental professionals working across the region. There are two established dental training units in South Wales and although these training units work effectively, the unit in North Wales will be a new approach to combine undergraduate,

foundation, dental core training, community, primary and specialised training. It aims to offer career pathways and opportunities for existing North Wales practitioners and dental professionals to upskill without having to leave the area.

Dr Chris Stockport, BCUHB's Executive Director of Primary and Community Care has previously said: *'There is a shortage of dentists across the UK, and providing the best possible education and training opportunities will undoubtedly help us to recruit and retain dentists here in North Wales. Our plans for the North Wales Dental Academy will provide both newly qualified and established dentists with an opportunity to train, work and live in a beautiful part of the world. As part of*

© Monty Rakusen / Cultura / Getty Images Plus

our plans and ongoing work to recommission replacement dental services, we will be seeking new and innovative ways of working that will make access to dentistry easier and reduce waiting times, whilst promoting self-care and good oral hygiene. Training links will be established with independent providers who could work from the facility as part of a bespoke new service model that would help to address the shortfall in access to dentistry services in the area.'

The North Wales Dental Academy practice in Bangor was offered for procurement on Sell2Wales with the health board aiming to award in Autumn 2021. Although a location for the proposed facility has not yet been identified, it is expected to consist of lecture and seminar rooms, hands on teaching facilities and clinical space.

The practice will mainly focus on access initially; it will be a test bed for the future of Welsh contract reform and will be rooted in Welsh government policy objectives 'Oral Health and Dental Services Response to A Healthier Wales' and 'Prudent Health Care'.^{1,2}

The programme of General Dental Service contract reform, part of wider system reform, will change how dental teams deliver service provision and how they are performance managed and monitored for providing dental care. This will include incentives to promote access to services, a step-up prevention and utilise the preventative-skills of the whole dental team to meet patients' needs. Robust measures of need and outcomes will be used to capture the clinical challenges dental teams experience and the impact dental services are making to capture 'outcomes of care provision' and ensure evidence-informed prevention ('what we know works') is being delivered.

Setting expectations

BCUHB has high expectations. They are seeking a provider who can deliver a flagship NHS dental practice, which will embrace all the requirements of contract reform and system change. This will involve the practice adopting a preventive approach to care for all, increasing access to those patients with higher levels of need and provide a full range of high quality, evidence-based NHS dental care to support the needs of the population.

The desired outcome would be for the provider to offer services to the population beyond traditional core hours to ensure that all those patients who seek to access NHS dental services are able to do so. Also, for the provider to embrace, extend and utilise

the skill mix within the practice to enable a dentist led, best clinician delivered service effort. This will include abandoning the Unit of Dental Activity (UDA) mindset, adopting Assessment of Clinical Oral Risk and Needs (ACORN) led integrated care and use of digital technology where appropriate to improve care.

Longer term, BCUHB sees the provider helping to shape the development of driving innovative change in the provision of care, linking educational opportunities with service provision and adopting working methods of the whole of the team.

This ambition will be achieved by improving the skills of dental registrants in primary, community and secondary care utilising the skills of all available stakeholders, developing opportunities for dentists with enhanced skills, cascading education and learning through Peer-to-Peer training and increasing the potential for developing research opportunities for the whole NHS dental team.

Health Education and Improvement Wales sits alongside Health Boards and Trusts and is the only Special Health Authority within NHS Wales. HEIW takes a leading role in the education, training, development and shaping of the healthcare workforce in Wales, supporting high-quality care for the people of Wales.

Its vision is to transform the workforce for a Healthier Wales. With an annual budget of £215 million and 90% spent on training and education, its function is wide and far reaching, including workforce planning, strategy and modernisation via education and training.

HEIW is a strategic stakeholder in the NWDA in the future training of dental registrants including Dental Foundation Trainees. There is already a commitment and agreement between BCUHB and Welsh Government for two Dental Foundation Trainee posts to be placed into the academy practice. It is expected that these placements will be for a year and cohorts will change each year. The first placements are expected from September 2022.

Bangor University is another key partner for the NWDA in the development and delivery of dental education and training. Bangor University shares the strategic vision for growth through innovation of dental training across the region. It has a strong reputation for supplying high quality healthcare professionals into the workforce both locally and nationally. The School

of Health Sciences at Bangor University already has in place a series of innovative programmes that can provide an immediate platform for collaboration with the NWDA, including the Clinical Academic Pathway, the Community of Scholars and the Applied Learning for Preventative Health Academy.

The All Wales Faculty for Dental Care Professionals sits within the School of Health Sciences and provides education, training and support for Dental Care Professionals (DCP) and is substantially invested in programmes to support the development of the DCP workforce in Wales, all linked to the reform programme.

Current registerable programmes in development include Dental Nursing (levels 3 & 4), Dental Hygiene (level 5), and aspirations for Dental Therapy (level 6). These programmes sit alongside a growing portfolio of online training aimed at embedding specific, reform linked, expertise within the DCP workforce. There are significant opportunities for collaboration with the NWDA across all these programmes.

A recent bid by Bangor University to deliver a commissioned undergraduate Dental Hygiene programme has been successfully awarded by Welsh Government and will see around 12-15 students starting Sept 2022. This programme will develop the students' clinical skills in a placement setting. It is expected that the NWDA practice will facilitate the delivery of work placements for some of these dental hygienist students alongside other primary and secondary dental care providers across the region. Given its size and scope, it is anticipated that the NWDA practice will form a central part of the placement circuit, providing students with the opportunity to work within a forward-thinking delivery environment.

Innovation, joined up thinking and close working relationships between all the stakeholders are crucial to making a success of this project. It is going great so far; we cannot wait to see what the future brings for dentistry in North Wales. ♦

References

1. Welsh Government. Oral health and dental services: our plan. Available online at: <https://gov.wales/oral-health-and-dental-services-our-plan> (Accessed July 2021).
2. Welsh Government. Prudent Healthcare. Available online at: <https://gov.wales/prudent-healthcare> (Accessed July 2021).

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41404-021-0836-y>