What a year this week has been

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This year, more than any that has gone before it, there is genuine befuddlement at how it is already December. It is ever-so clichéd, but that makes it no less true.

The majority of the last two years have been like nothing we've ever experienced. As we approach the turn of the year, it gives me the opportunity to do two things: pause for reflection and offer a heart-felt thank you.

Firstly, pausing for reflection. Back in January, many friends in the profession said every week felt like the longest, each being more mentally and physically exhausting than the one preceding it. For those with NHS commitments, 1 January saw the imposition of unrealistic targets, and let's not forget we were still in lockdown after a botched attempt to 'flatten the curve' ahead of the festive season. The targets saw practices in England face steep financial penalties if they failed to hit 45% of their pre-pandemic NHS activity targets from 1 January to 1 April 2021. One such practitioner said to me 'what a year this week has been!' It felt emblematic of the chaos seen throughout November and December, with primary care dentistry left to feed off scraps.

It really feels like that difficult time was an age ago, not the beginning of this year. Perhaps because for some, that feeling persists. That NHS target is now 65%, albeit without being set against a backdrop of country-wide lockdown. Practices are still facing major limits on capacity owing to standard operating procedures designed during the first wave of the pandemic. In response to BDA calls to commission a roadmap to ease COVID-19 restrictions, all four UK Chief Dental Officers issued a rare joint statement in June, committing to a review. Approaches to ease restrictions are set to be consulted on, but there is no clarity when any changes will take effect, or indeed what levels of additional capacity this may unlock. Increases in thresholds at this point therefore remain premature.

The BDA has pressed for restraint on targets, underlining that any significant increase will further undermine the long-term sustainability of services in England. It has said clear ambition is also required from government to honour pledges to reform the widely discredited NHS contract. In recent BDA surveys approaching half of dentists indicated they were likely to change career or seek early retirement in the next 12 months should current COVID-19 restrictions remain in place. The same proportion stated they were likely to reduce their NHS commitment.

While much of the focus is on the systematic crumbling of NHS dentistry, private colleagues

have fared little better. In this publication last month, Paul Mottram, Chair of the British Dental Association's Private Practice Subcommittee, highlighted critical livelihood and capacity issues faced – practitioners were unable to use the SEISS scheme and practice owners had overheads to meet as well as an increasing number of practices who have had to cease accepting new private patients as they are overwhelmed with their own.¹

This leads me onto my second point: a thank you. Thank you to each and every reader (and beyond) who, in the face of adversity and against a backdrop of a global pandemic, have done their profession proud. Thank you to everyone throughout the course of 2021 who has stuck their head above the parapet to say this is not good enough and we need change. Thank you to everyone who has stood up for dentistry in the face of criticism of being unable to secure an appointment. Rest assured, the BDA will not sit on its laurels to ensure your sacrifices since the beginning of the pandemic have not been for nothing.

And with that, all it leaves me to say, from all of us at *BDJ In Practice*, we wish you a very merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year. ♦

Reference

1. Westgarth D. Addressing the backlog of patients: A view from across the profession. *BDJ In Pract* 2021; **34**: 14-19.

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