

Dentistry inquiry offers chance to bring service back from the brink

The British Dental Association says a new parliamentary inquiry into access to NHS dentistry may represent a last best hope to save the service. With dental access problems at an all-time high, and an exodus from the NHS dental workforce in motion, the BDA stress real scrutiny is now essential to draw a line under the government's poverty of ambition on reform.

Ministers recently announced minor tweaks to the discredited NHS dental contract fuelling the current crisis, without a penny of new investment attached. The system continues to put government targets ahead of patient care, and funds services for barely half the population.

The number of dentists delivering NHS care in England has fallen to 2017/18 levels, and BDA surveys suggest that for every dentist leaving since lockdown, 10 have reduced their NHS commitment by significant amounts. This exodus from the NHS will have a major and lasting impact on patients' ability to access NHS dentistry, with every vacancy that goes unfilled translating into thousands of patients missing out on care.

In its recent report into the NHS workforce, the Health and Social Care Committee dubbed the dental contract as 'not fit for purpose', stating that 'urgent reform is needed to boost recruitment and retention in NHS dental services.' The dedicated inquiry is the first in a generation. A 2008 report prompted a government-commissioned review, outlining fundamental changes to NHS dentistry, which successive administrations have failed to implement. A 2019 inquiry was later cut short by the snap general election.

In May, the BDA told the Committee that NHS dentistry faces a 'slow death' without concerted action. The professional body warns that the government's stated ambitions to improve patient access and retain dentists in the NHS cannot be met without new investment. With skyrocketing inflation, simply to maintain the spending power in recent budgets would require an additional outlay of nearly £0.5b a year. This follows a decade of savage cuts, in which funds failed to keep pace with inflation and population growth. It would take an extra £1.5b a year just

to restore resources for NHS dentistry in England to 2010 levels.

Shawn Charlwood, Chair of the British Dental Association's General Dental Practice Committee said: 'This inquiry offers hope to millions of patients left with no options.'

'NHS dentistry faces a man-made crisis, the net result of a decade of choices made in Westminster. 'To date, Ministers have simply tinkered at the margins. A failed, underfunded system demands real scrutiny and real reform.'



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Diversity in Dentistry Action Group moves to CGDent

The Diversity in Dentistry Action Group (DDAG) is now hosted by the College of General Dentistry.

The group, formed in 2020 to deliver action to identify and address discrimination of all types within the dental professions, comprises over 70 members drawn from more than 35 national dental organisations.

In 2021, DDAG published a landmark report, Equality, diversity and inclusion within dentistry: a profession-wide commitment, which made a number of recommendations after identifying significant disparities in the ethnic profile of dental students, dental professionals and clinical dental academics, and significant under-representation of individuals from black ethnic minority backgrounds, and of women in leadership positions within dentistry.

While originally initiated within the Office of the Chief Dental Officer for

England, DDAG has always been led by the member organisations themselves and operated independently of the NHS, and it will continue to operate independently within CGDent.

Dr Nishma Sharma, Chair and founder of the DDAG, said: 'Like the College of General Dentistry, the Diversity in Dentistry Action Group is an organisation formed by and for the profession it serves, and our move to the College reflects our shared commitment to ensuring that all dental team members are represented and supported, across both NHS and private dentistry, throughout the UK and beyond. On behalf of DDAG's members, I would like to thank the OCDO for having enabled and supported our work over the last two years, and we look forward to continuing to work together at CGDent.'

Dr Abhi Pal, President of the College of General Dentistry, said: 'The realisation of the College's founding mission - to promote

career progression and job satisfaction for every dental professional - requires a wholehearted commitment to ensuring equality, diversity and inclusivity within our great profession. The Diversity in Dentistry Action Group brings the whole profession together with this purpose, we have been a member since its inception, and we are extremely proud to be its new home.'

