

Latest figures reveal depth of Scotland's access crisis

The British Dental Association has called on the Scottish Government to fix the broken system underpinning NHS dentistry, as new data reveal little sign of a recovery in attendance and ever-widening health inequalities.

Figures from Public Health Scotland show participation rates – contact with a dentist within the past two years – continued to fall. On 30 September 2022 just 50.4% of all registered patients had seen an NHS dentist within the last two years, still down on the 52.6% seen in 2021, and a considerable reduction from almost two-thirds (65.1%) in 2020. The participation rate among registered children was higher than for adults (65.7% compared to 47.2%).

The gap between the most and least deprived areas in Scotland continues to grow, with the new data showing record inequalities in participation rates. In September 2008, the gap in child participation between the most and least deprived areas was three percentage points; this had increased to seven percentage points by 2010, eighteen percentage points (55.3% compared to 73.1%) in September 2021. The figure now stands at twenty percentage points (55.9% compared with 75.8%).

The BDA has warned that lower levels of participation will inevitably translate into a higher dental disease burden, with deep oral health inequalities expected to widen even further given the cumulative

impact of limited access to services, the temporary suspension of public health programmes, and the impact of lockdown diets. Lower participation will reduce the chance of picking up early signs of decay and oral cancers at routine check-ups, and delays in treatment will mean higher costs to the NHS and worse outcomes for patients.

Registration rates remain high due to lifetime registration – over 95.4% of the Scottish population were registered with an NHS dentist in September 2022 – but the percentage of children registered fell marginally.

Free NHS dental for all remains a key Scottish Government policy. BDA Scotland has long warned that a return to a 'business as usual model' – low margin and high volume – will put practices under unsustainable financial pressure, with soaring running costs raising the risk of closure or movement to the private sector. BDA Scotland stresses that Ministers must continue with additional financial support for practices, set to end on 1 April 2023 to support dentists and their teams as they work through the historic backlog of dental care and until a new, sustainable funding arrangement for NHS dentistry is in place. These data follow recent reports of a growing exodus of dentists from the NHS.

David McColl, Chair of the British Dental Association's Scottish Dental Practice Committee said: 'Patients in Scotland's poorest communities are paying the price for the crisis in dentistry.

'The Scottish Government must not try to hide behind positive sounding registration figures. The reality is patient participation remains on the floor, and inequalities are set to widen.

'Dentists are reconsidering their futures working in a broken system. NHS dentistry is on the critical list, and real reform won't wait.'

Welsh Government cooking the books on patient numbers

The British Dental Association has urged the Welsh Government to correct to the record, following misleading claims that 112,000 'extra' dental appointments have been secured by recent reforms.

Under plans taken forward last year Ministers have made dentists prioritise seeing 'new' patients, with healthier patients receiving less frequent check-ups.

'The total number of patients seen by NHS dentists in Wales has yet to return to anything resembling pre-COVID levels'

BDA Wales stress the reality is that the increase in new patients – many of whom are higher needs and require more time and attention – will necessitate a sharp drop in access for more regular attenders. It warns these numbers cannot disguise the Welsh Government's unwillingness to invest in NHS services and provide access for all. The total number of patients seen by NHS dentists in Wales has yet to return to anything resembling pre-COVID levels.

Dentist leaders say pledges of £2m in additional funding to increase access to dental services amount to a 1% boost on pre-COVID budget levels and will barely scrape the sides given skyrocketing inflation. They stress meaningfully boosting access and halting the exodus from the NHS workforce can only be achieved through sustained investment, which the Welsh Government has thus far declined to offer.

Russell Gidney, Chair of the British Dental Association's Welsh General Dental Practice Committee, said: 'The Welsh Government is cooking the books on patient numbers. Ministers haven't created 100,000 extra appointments but simply moved the goalposts. The fact is for every new patient seen a dozen historic patients could lose access to dentistry. This is all that's possible when we fail to meaningfully invest in frontline services.'

