

Charity backs latest report exposing NHS dentistry crisis

The Oral Health Foundation has welcomed a new damning report exposing the unacceptable decline of NHS dentistry.

A report published by the Health and Social Care Committee found that NHS dentistry is in crisis and in need of fundamental reform.

The Oral Health Foundation applauds the outcomes of the report, blasting officials on the current state of NHS dentistry, and calling for urgent and decisive action to end the current mess that surrounds NHS dentistry.

Dr Nigel Carter, Chief Executive of the Oral Health Foundation, says: 'NHS dentistry has been in freefall for years. Unsupported by government with no clear plan or direction towards an efficient and sustainable model to make NHS dentistry fit for purpose in today's landscape.'

'The Health Select Committee inquiry, which took place earlier this year, gave a voice to thousands of people within the profession and industry to express their disappointments, fears and anger over the state of NHS dentistry. The Oral Health Foundation's response was deeply critical, and we are delighted that many of our concerns were matched in the published report last week.'

The charity is supporting the need for early action concerning the current dental crisis in the UK, as well as the right of everyone who wants to access NHS dentistry, to be able to do so in a timely manner without the need to travel many miles.

The Oral Health Foundation also welcomes proposals for urgent and fundamental contract reform. The charity wants to see the implementation of a capitation-based system which is designed to help reduce dental inequalities, together with a more emphasis on the prevention of dental disease.

'It is most frustrating that many of the issues around the NHS dental contract that have been laid bare in last week's report were also identified in a Health Select Committee from 2008,' adds Dr Carter. 'Despite many years of piloting and prototyping, the necessary changes to reform NHS dentistry have still not been implemented. These are essential to many of the other proposals, including workforce expansion and retention.'

The Oral Health Foundation is joining calls for the urgent, early publication of the promised Recovery Plan for Dental Services by the government. The charity is also backing the need for more clarity concerning patient's rights in relation to

NHS dentistry. This includes a greater clarity on the move towards less frequent dental recalls for patients with good oral hygiene and lower risk of dental disease.

Dr Carter says: 'Our views on patient registration, have not changed since the last report in 2008. Dental registration allows patients to be registered with their individual dentist, this helps to build loyalty between patient and dentist, a good rapport and a trusting relationship. This will improve oral health and successful prevention measures.'

Amongst many other points raised by the recent report, the Oral Health Foundation is endorsing the urgent need for a dental workforce survey, the mandatory inclusion of dental representation on ICBs (Integrated Care Boards), and the speeding up of processes for potential overseas registrants. Faith in NHS dentistry has been lost amongst the general public and the dental profession,' adds Dr Carter.

'We hope this report is the catalyst for campaigners such as ourselves, to add the necessary pressure on government to make the changes that are so badly needed. We will not allow the government to give up on NHS dentistry – it is an essential service that must be protected at any cost.'

Reform must not be a final destination for service in Scotland

The British Dental Association has said Scottish Government reforms to NHS dentistry fall short of the root and branch change required to make the service fit for the 2020s. Following tense negotiations, a reformed payment system will be rolled out from 1 November 2023. This includes changes to the fees provided for many treatments and will see the number of items on the 'menu' at dental practices slimmed down – purportedly meant to make it less burdensome – to 45 codes down from around 400. The BDA had stressed that surging costs had left practices delivering some NHS care at a financial loss, particularly for items like dentures that require laboratory work. These items have seen significant increases in fee levels.

However, the professional body has stressed reforms offer no fundamental changes to the current model of care.

The service is still predicated on a low margin/high volume system, without the appropriate targeting of resources for those in highest need. The BDA had been seeking a clean break towards a new patient-centred and prevention-focused model and say the package as it stands will do little to tackle deep oral health inequality across Scotland.

Dentist leaders have warned ministers not to view the current package as a 'final destination.' There is uncertainty over whether these changes will be sufficient to halt the exodus of dentists from NHS services and restore access to millions.

The Scottish Parliament COVID Recovery Committee recently concluded its inquiry into the recovery of NHS dentistry, including a recommendation that the Scottish Government provide costings for – and consults on – different service

model options, including those that it does not prefer, in partnership with the sector so that the opportunity is not missed to consider a full range of options for the future of service delivery.

David McColl, Chair of the British Dental Association's Scottish Dental Practice Committee said: 'We've secured some improvements, but the fundamentals of a broken system remain unchanged. The Scottish Government have stuck with a drill and fill model designed in the 20th century. They were unwilling to even start a conversation on making this service fit for the 21st.'

'Ministers cannot pretend this is a final destination for NHS dentistry in Scotland. We struggle to see how these changes alone will close the oral health gap, end the access crisis or halt the exodus from the NHS.'