

Access crisis piling pressure across NHS

The British Dental Association has said figures from the Labour Party on the nearly 70,000 patients who sought dental care in emergency departments last year are just the tip of the iceberg, and that the access crisis in dentistry is being felt in all corners of the health service.

Dental charges and ongoing access problems have long pushed patients from high street dentistry to A&E services and

General Practice, but access problems have escalated, with unmet need for dentistry now standing at 12 million, or 1 in 4 of England's adult population. Medics are neither trained nor equipped to provide dental care, and these visits typically require a referral back to a dentist. While patients can receive pain relief, or antibiotics for infection, they usually require an operative intervention.

Tooth decay remains the number one reason for hospital admissions among young children. The first oral health survey of 5-year-olds published since lockdown showed no improvements in decay levels and a growing gap between rich and poor. Widening oral health inequality is set to pile more pressure across both primary and secondary care.

Ministers pledged a recovery plan for NHS dentistry in April 2023. Widely expected before the

summer recess, it remained unpublished as parliament broke for conference season. In July the Health and Social Care Committee concluded its damning inquiry, describing the state of the service as 'unacceptable in the 21st century', and set out recommendations to government for real, urgent reform, alongside a call for any recovery plan to be underpinned by necessary funding. The Government's response to the inquiry has been overdue since 14 September 2023.

British Dental Association Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'From GP surgeries to A&E, the crisis in NHS dentistry is piling pressure on every corner of our health service.'

'Our medical colleagues can offer pain relief or antibiotics, but these won't cure toothache. Patients in dental pain need a dentist, but any progress hinges on real reform and investment. Until then millions will have nowhere to go.'



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New survey reveals impact of staff shortages on wellbeing

Over a third (35%) of dental professionals say they are not able to take breaks during the day to eat or drink, and over half (52%) say the impact of exhaustion on the delivery of quality patient care is affecting their mental health, according to a new survey.

In the Dental Protection survey of over 1,300 dental professionals in the UK, over a third (36%) also say fear of dentolegal issues arising from staff shortages is having a negative impact on their mental health.

Dr Yvonne Shaw, Deputy Dental Director at Dental Protection said: 'Dentistry is still a rewarding profession – being able to improve oral health and the quality of life of the public is a privilege which instils a sense of professional satisfaction. However, morale in the profession seems to be at a low ebb, and wellbeing concerns are central to this.'

'Demand for dental services remains high, the environment is increasingly challenging and there is a limit on what can be done within available capacity. Clearly some dental professionals are not taking breaks during the working day and are skipping meals, foregoing essential nourishment as a result. This is exacerbated by work overload and staff shortages.'

'Dental professionals are among the most dedicated healthcare professionals, so I am not surprised that many put the concerns of their patients before their own; however, not stopping to eat and drink is concerning both for the health of the dental team and the adverse impact this can have on the delivery of care.'

'One of the many problems with staff shortages is the knock-on effect on the mental health of remaining staff who risk becoming exhausted and/or demotivated. Over half of our members tell us they are worrying about how exhaustion and burnout are impacting the safe delivery of patient care. The effect of not being able to provide optimum standards of care on any healthcare professional's mental health – due to external factors and pressures outside of their control – cannot be overstated.'

'Many members also tell us they work in fear of becoming embroiled in dentolegal issues arising due to staff shortages, and that this constant worry is having a detrimental impact on their mental health. I would like to reassure all members that we are here to offer support in the event of a claim, complaint

or other dentolegal issue arising from your professional practice.'

Dental professionals who participated in the survey commented anonymously: 'It is apparent to me that the dental industry is a hostile place to work. I fear answering my phone or checking my emails, waiting for developments in the dentolegal case against me, or heaven forbid any further cases should arise. I genuinely try my hardest every day and always put my patients first, and genuinely believe 99.9% of the patients I treat are happy, but after one dentolegal case my confidence is at rock bottom.'

'Staff shortages are putting pressure on other staff members.'

'I cannot recruit an associate dentist to look after patients and meet targets and so I face a big clawback which will have a severe financial impact on the running of the business.'

'Being a young dentist, dentolegal issues are looming over my head. Especially from patients who have worked the system to their advantage and attempted the same techniques (esp. with young dentists or female dentists or dentists of colour). The anxiety has affected the way I work, my professional goals and physical wellbeing.'