

## Understanding shifts in the dental landscape

As is often the case, dentistry today is in a state of change. There are several challenges that need to be overcome if the profession is to effectively deliver care to patients in the immediate and long-term future.

Some of the concerns centre on NHS dentistry and the impact that the current framework is having on the profession's ability to care for patients. Martin Woodrow, Chief Executive of the British Dental Association, considers some of the major associated issues being faced in the UK right now.

'The overwhelming challenge for NHS dentistry is being able to attract and retain a workforce', he said. 'This applies across the UK. NHS dentistry is not currently an attractive place to work for many professionals. While some changes have been made to the contractual frameworks, in England those have not been enough to stem the flow of professionals seeking a better balance to their working lives. The problem has been there since 2006, but the pandemic accelerated the change we are seeing.'

For many professionals and practices, part of the solution is moving towards private dentistry. This presents its own set of challenges, in addition to its benefits, as Martin continues.

'For the profession, the shift to private dentistry offers more freedom in how they approach the provision of care. It enables more time to deliver dentistry, with fewer constraints and less bureaucracy. There are risks of course; NHS dentistry offers greater security of income and additional benefits such as an NHS pension and parental leave. The wider economic climate could also mean that the appetite for private dentistry is limited.

It appears that much of the shift in provision is more about a lack of supply of NHS dentistry than demand for private care. There are and always will be some patients – including some of the most vulnerable – who simply can't afford private dental services. Given the limited resources we have to provide publicly-funded oral healthcare, many would make the argument that those resources ought to be focused towards people who need care the most. There is also a strong case to argue that we should invest more in prevention in order to serve the needs of the population.'

Though no one has a crystal ball, it is important to consider future trends in order to best serve the nation in the long-term. With concerns identified, there are several factors that need addressing if oral health is to be protected – and enhanced – for the years to come. Martin outlines the three main areas he feels are most pertinent.

'The UK's oral health has improved significantly over the past 50 years, but more recent oral health surveys indicate that progress has tailed off, and there is a persistent (and potentially increasing) problem with oral health inequalities. Broadly speaking, three factors contribute to oral health – access to fluoride; the amount of sugar in diets; and access to oral health care. The first two of these we can help address via public health measures. Alongside provision in toothpaste, fluoridation of water supplies can be a safe and effective measure, although,

of course, it has its opponents. And there are plenty of legislative interventions that can be made to reduce sugar intake. We will continue to encourage governments to make these. The third area – making oral healthcare more widely available – is perhaps the biggest challenge. Governments need to step up and invest in NHS dentistry. They need to ensure that dentists and their teams want to provide public sector dentistry, and develop payment systems that are geared towards making sure those who most need care actually receive it.'

Of course, there is much more that needs to be discussed and dental professionals need to remain abreast of the latest statistics, research findings and clinical techniques in order to continually operate in the best interests of their patients. That's why the BDIA Dental Showcase 2024 is not an event to miss. It will provide an update on everything from questions about the NHS dentistry framework, to skill mix in the practice, staff recruitment and an array of clinical topics, with sessions presented by experts and thought-leaders in their respective fields.

Register today to secure your place at BDIA Dental Showcase 2024 on 22 and 23 March at ExCeL London at: [dentalshowcase.com](https://dentalshowcase.com).

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