The future of NHS dentistry – anyone's guess?

Caroline Holland attempts to understand the vision

for dentistry based on what's NOT in the NHS Long Term Plan!

January was a hectic month with the publication of the NHS Long Term plan,¹ a dental question in the House of Lords and the opening of a hybrid dental practice, namely a private practice trying to serve NHS patients!

The NHS Long Term Plan is revealing about the future of NHS dental provision, more for what it doesn't say than what it does. The plan has triggered varying responses among the dental profession and its patients, from a positive welcome in some quarters to bewildered and downright angry in others.

I can recommend a Public Health England blog² to convey its essence. In a nutshell, the emphasis of the NHS Long Term Plan is on prevention and transforming the NHS from a service which treats patients to a system which keeps us all well for longer. One of its qualities appears to be compassion. Look at some of the chapter headings and you will see what I mean:

- Stronger action on NHS inequalities

- Children with cancer
- Care leavers
- A strong start in life for children and young people.

This plan appears to be focusing its sights on those with high needs. Think back to some of the scandals of the last few years and I believe they influenced the direction of the document – child abuse in Rotherham, A&E departments overwhelmed by numbers, sick patients queuing on trolleys, wasted outpatient appointments valued at £8m, £50.5 million on general anaesthetics for decay-related dental extractions.....The plan may be short on detail but the majority of people who want the country to be fairer and kinder may find reassurance that the most vulnerable are a priority.

The plan recognises the importance of health and wellbeing – and this includes the dental needs – of people with learning disabilities and autism. It states that local areas should design and implement models of care that will '...provide holistic care across local authority and NHS services.' Oral health is included among the named services.

Children and young people are a major theme. The plan states that care provision - to include oral health - should be across local authority and NHS services. Both the British Society of Paediatric Dentistry and the British Association of Dental Therapists have welcomed this aspect.

There is residual concern among many commentators that the push towards improved partnership working with local authorities is happening at a time when councils are having their budgets slashed. Local authorities are

being urged to deliver more and better oral health programmes at the same time as cutting spending.

The only direct reference to dentistry in the plan is through a mention of Starting Well, yet the wording is misleading. The plan states that 24,000 dentists are being supported by the Starting Well initiative to see children from a young age to form good oral habits. In fact, only 213 practices in 13 areas are involved with Starting Well, so probably less than 1000 dentists are being supported.

A House of Lords Q&A³ – which took place within 8 days of the publication of the NHS Long Term plan - mentioned Starting Well and provided up-to-date figures for the initiative. Baroness Manzoor, who was answering the questions on behalf of the government, said most Starting Well practices have an oral health champion. And in Hull, dental practices have health visitors attached.

The brief exchange in the House of Lords seemed to deliver more information about dentistry than the 136 page NHS plan. So why was there so little in the document about dentistry? This begs questions! Ben Underwood, a GDP, an NHS Accelerator Fellow and a member of our reader panel identifies the questions he would like to ask:

1. The plan mentions that '*...digital technology will provide convenient ways for patients to access advice and care.*' Will this include access to dentists and oral health advice?
2. Will the NHS app allow patients to book dental appointments and share their medical records with their dentist?
3. The plan frequently mentions the

importance of self-care and people/patients managing their own health – does this include oral health?

4. To quote the plan, *'In ten years' time, we expect the existing model of care to look markedly different. The NHS will offer a 'digital first' option for most, allowing for longer and richer face-to-face consultations with clinicians where patients want or need it.'* Will this include dentistry, for example, with prevention advice given remotely, possibly to the patient in their own bathroom?
5. *'People will be helped to stay well, to recognise important symptoms early, and to manage their own health, guided by digital tools.'* Will this include recognising symptoms of dental disease and managing their own oral health with for example oral health apps that make it into the NHS Apps Library?
6. *'We will enable staff to capture all health and care information digitally at the point of care.'* Does this mean all dental practices will be supported to move away from paper notes?

The reference to the model of care being 'markedly different' in ten years gives us the best clue to the mindset of the authors of this document in my opinion. Dentistry is going to change dramatically, so dramatically that it is impossible to predict what it will look like in ten years time. As the creator of BrushDJ, Ben rightly has a vision for the use of digital technology. As Editor of *BDJ Team*, I find myself thinking about you, my readers.

Dental Care Professionals are likely to play a more significant role in the future. It is you who are tasked with giving oral health advice, it is you who provide preventive treatments, like topical fluoride applications. You, naturally, will be at the forefront of preventive dentistry, which we know from the Green Paper⁴ published last year, is the way that Health Minister Matt Hancock wants to take Society.

Of course, the authors may not have thought of dentistry in general practice at all. The plan certainly gives that impression and this has naturally angered the British Dental Association. Which doesn't mean to say that there won't be an impact. As commentator and dental writer Michael Watson said in his blog: '... any improvement in the NHS as a whole will benefit dentistry if they free up money currently spent on treatment and allow it to be spent on prevention of dental disease. Many of the initiatives mentioned, for example to reduce the number of people smoking and sugar consumption, will benefit dental health, even if this is not the primary reason they are being promoted.'

But if you think you are getting a sense of where this is all leading, the advent of a new

style of dental practice, confuses the picture. The mydentist Access practice is being rolled out in areas where there is no access to NHS dentistry. It is described as an 'affordable' alternative to NHS dental care. I always think affordable is a highly subjective word! The CEO of mydentist says the group aims to work alongside the NHS and provide patients who have long waiting

uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/nhs-long-term-plan.pdf (accessed February 2019).

2. Public Health England. The NHS Long Term Plan: 10 key public health points. Available at: <https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2019/01/08/the-nhs-long-term-plan-10-key-public-health-points/> (accessed February 2019).

Debbie McGovern, BADT President

Michael Watson, dentist blogger

Ben Underwood, NHS Accelerator Fellow

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times with good dental care quickly. I will be surprised whether this new approach, backed by Matt Hancock, will work. The fact it's happening at all makes me wonder what discussions are taking place between dental corporates and the government? Little wonder it's impossible to predict the future of NHS dentistry!

All we know is that while the future for dentistry is generally uncertain, dental therapists, hygienists and nurses are likely to enjoy a more significant role.

References

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