

From heroism to hardship: dental nurses during the pandemic

By **Caroline Holland**

Dental nursing as an occupation has one of the highest exposures to coronavirus (COVID-19). This is according to the Office of National Statistics¹ (ONS) which last month worked out relative exposures for a broad span of professions using figures from the US.

The daily risks faced by dental nurses was one of the stark facts to emerge as many found themselves at the frontline of the pandemic. More dental nurses were redeployed into the wider NHS during April and May than any other dental group and their efforts were heroic. But that is only part of the story.

At the other extreme were dental nurses who experienced hardship and confusion. One dental nurse went onto the Money Saving Expert Forum to ask if it was acceptable that her employer was insisting that her enforced time away from the practice during the pandemic was taken as holiday.

A practice manager correctly pointed out on the 'Dental Nurse Dilemma' thread that the employer was continuing to receive their monthly UDA allocation, so she should be paid without having to forfeit her holiday.

According to the British Association of Dental Nurses (BADN), this situation is typical of the many different cries for help they received. Dental nurses were regularly ringing the association's helpline, usually because practice owners with NHS contracts were telling their dental nurses they would either receive no pay or reduced pay. Other examples of queries that they dealt with were that dental nurses were being told that they must:

- Go into the practice to clean, decorate, clear out basements or gardens
- Volunteer for redeployment, or they would not be paid
- 'Pay back' hours to the practice once the pandemic is over because they were working reduced hours.

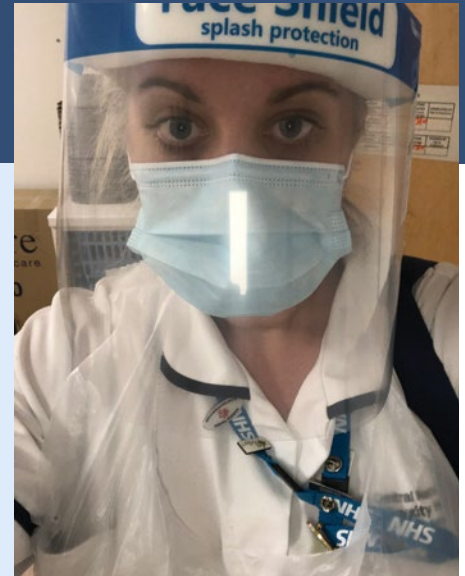
Jacqui Elsdon President of BADN is also regional DCP lead for Health Education England in London, Kent, Surrey and Sussex (HEELKSS). She knows several dental nurses who volunteered for a range of different services. She believes the pandemic had heightened the disadvantages faced by team members who work for practice owners with NHS contracts but receive none of the benefits, such as the NHS pension or security of employment. And yet as a profession, dental nurses are better trained in carrying out valuable cross infection control procedures than just about anyone else.

Jacqui said: 'I think dental nurses feel aggrieved that they work for the NHS but are not entitled to the same benefits as those employed directly. Without an NHS identity card they couldn't take advantage of the NHS keyworkers' supermarket hour.'

According to the ONS survey which highlighted the risks dental nurses faced from coronavirus, they are also among the lowest paid profession with average hourly earnings of £10.15. Once the pandemic is fully over, said Jacqui, BADN would be lobbying to ensure that practice-based dental nurses get the recognition and protection they deserve.

Fiona Ellwood, Executive Board Member of the Society of British Dental Nurses (SBDN), said that at the height of the pandemic, SBDN faced many anxious calls from members and non-members alike. SBDN also opened a mental health and wellbeing line which was staffed 24/7 by mental health first aiders to support members facing extreme stress and to assist non-members too.

In addition to a shortage of money and an absence of clear guidance, many dental nurses were worried about losing their jobs. Fiona said that many are parents of young children and they had anxieties around childcare and taking the virus home. 'They were not worried about themselves they were



Dental nurse Joanne Wrigley who was transferred from the Paediatric Department at Manchester Dental Hospital to the Family Liaison Team at the Royal Manchester Infirmary

worried about their children. And some have parents who are shielded and vulnerable. It was a time of extreme stress.'

Fiona said the British Dental Association (BDA) had been very supportive and helped her get accurate messages out around what was expected of employers of dental nurses. 'A lot of anger has come from uncertainty and confusion. Dental nurses need to be heralded for their contribution during the pandemic and their willingness to volunteer; all too often they are identified as "and others". We are acutely aware that this is not isolated to dental nursing, but the Society is there for its members.'

Reference

1. Office for National Statistics. Which occupations have the highest potential exposure to the coronavirus (COVID-19)? 11 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/which-occupations-have-the-highest-potential-exposure-to-the-coronavirus-covid19/2020-05-11> (accessed June 2020).