



Raising awareness of menopause among the dental team



The British Society of Dental Hygiene and

Therapy Oral Health Conference 2022 takes place at Manchester Central from 25–26 November 2022. As part of the lecture programme Haleon (formerly part of GSK) will be sponsoring a presentation from **Joseph Bell** on the topic of Menopause in Dentistry. In this article we learn more from Joseph about the topic and why now is the right time to take action.

It can be said that dentistry is approaching a key test within its workforce regarding the menopause. Within the dental profession, 77% of the dental team identify as women, including 93% of dental hygienists and dental therapists.¹ Forty-three percent of dentists and 37% of the other members of the dental team are currently within the age range that can be affected by menopause.¹ Despite this, and the growing awareness in society of the impact of menopause for women, there is no specific literature on the impacts it can have for members of the dental team.

Menopause usually occurs between the age of 45 and 55 although it may happen earlier as a result of surgery to remove the ovaries or uterus, cancer treatments or for genetic reasons.² Perimenopause relates to the time where symptoms may occur before periods stop. A woman officially reaches menopause when she has not had a period for 12 months.²

Menopause and perimenopause can

cause symptoms including anxiety, brain fog, hot flushes and irregular periods.² These symptoms have been shown to have a significant impact on women's lives.

In October 2021, to coincide with Menopause Awareness Month, a campaign was launched to ensure that all NHS dental services have a menopause policy in place. Working with my colleague Professor Claire Stevens, we wanted to start a process to eradicate the taboo that surrounds menopause across dentistry.

I was inspired by my mum's involvement in helping to introduce a menopause policy at HSBC to discuss the subject. Due to the open discussions in our household, I did not see the subject as taboo. As a young man working in dentistry, I feel there is an opportunity for me to raise awareness amongst all members of the dental team as even if the menopause does not affect you directly, it may impact your colleagues, your patients or your family. We need to be able to discuss the impacts with empathy and be aware that the implications are gender specific but impact the whole profession.

I have worked with a number of female colleagues who shared their experiences of symptoms and their impact. It is clear to me that more needs to be done to support women in the workplace during this time.

In a survey carried out by the British Medical Association, 90% of responders said menopause symptoms has affected their working lives but 38% said they were unable to make the changes that they needed to working patterns to cope with symptoms. It found that female doctors going through the menopause were reducing their hours, moving to lower paid roles or retiring early.³ Based on the profile of the dental workforce that I outlined there could be a significant impact and result in the loss of valuable staff.

Aspects of work which women cite as impacting symptoms include high temperature, humidity, poor ventilation, no access to quiet or restful space, and noise.⁵ Many of these may have become worse during the time of COVID with increased PPE etc.

There is a call to remove the taboo associated with menopause to allow for open discussions to support the individuals and also their colleagues and patients.

In the 'The Government report on menopause' Andrea Davis found that work is good for menopausal women as it provides a sense of identity and can fulfil social needs.⁴ However, working conditions with a lack of temperature controls, cramped conditions and stress can also make it worse.⁵

Research shows that one outcome is that

women may leave their jobs which in this case could have serious implications on the dental workforce. One survey in 2016 found that one in four women consider leaving work.⁶

So what can be done?

It is important to raise awareness of the menopause at work and create an environment where women feel comfortable to discuss the impacts. They should feel confident to discuss any concerns with their managers/dentists/practice principals.

As part of my presentation at the BSDHT conference I will share the guidance we have adapted specifically for dental teams. This includes tips for introducing a clear menopause policy, providing training on menopause for staff members and considering reasonable adjustments for the working environment.

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Women of menopausal age are vital members of the dental team and we need to ensure that we support them to prevent valuable staff from leaving the workplace. There is now a parliamentary enquiry into the workplace treatment of women going through the menopause and it may become law to have a menopause policy in organisations. The dental profession has the opportunity to be ahead of the curve for healthcare and I hope to share tips and ideas to make this work in your practice during my presentation.

Ultimately each case should be treated on its own merits – symptoms can be as unique as the individual members of the team. I hope my lecture is a thought provoking start for practice teams on supporting people during the menopause to continue with successful careers.

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