



Dental nurse retention in the UK



Dr **Debbie Reed**¹ reports on an internet mediated survey of members from the dental nurse workforce and what encourages them to remain within the dental sector.

I extend my personal thanks to all dental nurse colleagues who participated in the Dental Nurse Retention Survey earlier this year. The purpose of the survey was to

add to the knowledge base and thus the ability of the UK dental sector to retain the registered dental nurses as members of the UK's dental sector workforce. Since mid-March when the survey closed, I have been busy compiling the data and the report is set to publish in mid-October.

our national lexicon as a metaphor for the absence of dental practice, and the absence of dental professionals to deliver the care, within a number of regions across the UK.^{7,8}

The lack of some dental professions, such as dentists, to retain members of the workforce, had been likened to an 'exodus'.⁹ The perceived drop in the numbers of dental professionals, including dental nurses, had been termed a 'recruitment crisis'.^{10,11} The notion of the extent of the predicament with regards to the dental sector had been contested by some, as the General Dental Council (GDC) annual registrant numbers appeared to be stable, not

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Background, aim and project question

Access to dental treatment within the UK has come under national scrutiny, through popular media,¹ dental professional groups,^{2,3} and as part of UK Parliamentary debates^{4,5} and reports.⁶ The term 'dental deserts' entered

showing a significant deviation in averages, in comparison to previous years. When the survey was conducted (mid-February to mid-March 2023), there were 115,455 dental professionals registered by the UK dental regulator, the GDC,¹² which was an increase on numbers since the same time in 2022 (n = 114,237) and 2021 (n = 113,612).

Whilst much focus had been on dentists' recruitment and retention, to date, there is only minimal understanding of the position regarding the extent of the dental nurse workforce. The extent to which Registered Dental Nurses (RDNs*) remain committed or may be considering deregistering, and leaving the dental sector, is uncertain. There had been much commentary, speculation and anecdote regarding the factors that attract and retain RDNs and those factors which cause RDNs to leave. However, to date there had been little detailed contemporary evidence devoted to the matter of either dental nurse recruitment or retention.^{13,14} The need for further evidence was clear, from the paucity of data through which the dental sector in general, and in particular professional bodies (such as the College of General Dentistry [CGDent], British Association of Dental Nurses [BADN], and the Society of British Dental Nurses [SBDN]), employers, and other stakeholder groups, may gain a better understanding of how to retain dental nurses, and to hear that from the perspective of RDNs.

Therefore, the need to gain a deep understanding specifically about what currently encourages, and may continue in the future to encourage, members of the dental nurse professional community to remain working within the dental sector workforce, was apparent. The most obvious route for acquiring this information was by surveying the dental nurse community and 'hearing', through their responses, why they, RDNs, remain within their role, or for those who may have been leaving (or contemplating leaving), why they are considering doing so.

Consequently, the aim of the study was to provide insight, by establishing a body of knowledge about the current state of the RDN workforce within the UK, from

the perspective of RDNs. When creating the study, the belief was that knowledge needed to have utility and the potential to inform decisions regarding the measures most apposite when seeking to retain, and encourage, RDNs to continue to contribute as part of the dental workforce within the UK. The research question driving the study was: 'What factors encourage registered dental nurses to remain working within the UK dental sector?'

respondents 75% worked (either solely or in part) in area of the NHS. Of those who responded 59% were working full-time, and 91% of the dental nurses who took part in the survey were working fully (68%) or partly (23%) chairside.

Over 60% of respondents performed extended duties; most popular were radiography (46%), oral health education (33%), impression taking (30%), and implant dental nursing (28%). Only 16% of respondents said they were intending to

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Methodology, methods and process

The project used survey methodology, adopting deductive reasoning to evaluate the experiences of members of the registered dental nurse workforce. Ethical approval was granted from the University of Kent. An online questionnaire was mediated through an online forum (BADN newsletter) of members of the dental nurse community within the UK – available for completion from February–March 2023.

So far... participation and results

Having gathered the data, the results have now been compiled, and are due to be published in mid-October 2023. So far, what we know is... that there were over 3,000 RDNs who took part in the survey. Of those respondents, 89% held a UK dental nurse qualification, with the remainder having overseas qualifications or having joined the GDC register through grandparenting routes. The highest number of respondents (29%) were aged between 41–50 years old. Of those

leave dental nursing, 50% were definitively intending to remain in dental nursing. However, 34% of those who took part were uncertain if they would remain or not, making it even more important to understand how to tempt that group to stay.

To find out what else the data tells us...

So, what does keep RDNs in dental nursing? The report promises to provide essential detail which will contribute a better understanding of how to answer the vital question 'What factors encourage registered dental nurses to remain working within the UK dental sector?'. In addition, the report will also provide information regarding the factors which cause dental nurses to become uncertain about remaining, or leave altogether. The forthcoming DN Retention Report promises to be an insightful and fascinating read.

*RDN is used to differentiate from student dental nurses, dental nurses who have retired, or dental nurses no longer on the register.

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