

NEW SURVEY REVEALS IMPACT OF STAFF SHORTAGES ON DENTAL NURSES' WELLBEING

Over a third (35%) of dental nurses who took part in a new survey say the impact of staff shortages on the delivery of quality care is affecting their mental health, and 27% say they are not able to take breaks during the day to eat or drink.

In the Dental Protection survey of over 1,300 dental professionals in the UK, 32% of the 153 dental nurses who responded say the effect of exhaustion on the delivery of quality patient care is also having a negative impact on their mental health.

Dr Yvonne Shaw, Deputy Dental Director at Dental Protection said: 'Dentistry is still a rewarding profession – being able to improve oral health and the quality of life of the public is a privilege which instils a sense of professional satisfaction. However, morale in the profession seems to be at a low ebb, and wellbeing concerns are central to this.'

'Demand for dental services remains high, the environment is increasingly challenging and there is a limit on what can be done

within available capacity. Clearly some dental professionals are not taking breaks during the working day and are skipping meals, foregoing essential nourishment as a result. This is exacerbated by work overload and staff shortages.

'Dental professionals are among the most dedicated healthcare professionals, so I am not surprised that many put the concerns of patients before their own; however, not stopping to eat and drink is concerning both for the health of the dental team and the adverse impact this can have on the delivery of care.'

'One of the many problems with staff shortages is the knock-on effect on the mental health of remaining staff who risk becoming exhausted and/or demotivated. Over half of our members tell us they are worrying about how exhaustion and burnout are impacting the safe delivery of patient care. The effect of not being able to provide optimum standards of care on any healthcare professional's mental

health – due to external factors and pressures outside of their control – cannot be overstated.

Dental nurses who participated in the Dental Protection survey commented anonymously:

'I am under a lot of stress as I am expected to do my dental nursing and reception work, working one to one without a receptionist cover.'

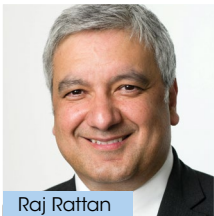
'The shortage of experienced good nurses is affecting all staff, with more work and no let up from patients if you don't get back to them immediately.'

'I am a dental nurse; whilst I love my job and enjoy working alongside my clinician, the days can be long and booked up, and I also tend to work into my lunch hour, because there is no designated time for the re-processing of instruments.'

The Dental Protection survey was completed by 1,379 dental members in the UK, including 153 dental nurses. The survey was in the field from 20 March to 17 April 2023.



DENTAL NURSES NOT IMMUNE TO ABUSE OVER ACCESS TO CARE



Dr Raj Raffan, Dental Director at Dental Protection

Earlier this year Dental Protection published the results of a survey which revealed that over half of dental professionals (57%) have experienced or witnessed verbal or physical abuse from patients or their relatives in the past 12 months. The majority (64%) said the incidents stemmed from frustration over long waiting times for appointments and 59% said it related to the treatment they received.

Patients who are seeking either routine care or treatment for dental emergencies are becoming increasingly frustrated. The environment is challenging and of course there is a limit to how many patients can be accommodated given available capacity.

Anger and frustration from patients strain professional relationships. The fall-out is felt by the whole dental team, and sadly dental nurses are not immune.

In our survey, nearly three in five dental nurses (59%) told us they had either experienced or witnessed abuse from patients or their relatives in the past year, with 44%

stating it affected their mental health.

Some of the anonymous comments from the dental professionals who took part in the survey are disturbing and highlight the daily challenges faced by some teams. One member explained how the team were 'physically threatened because a patient could not access care anywhere due to closed lists'. The police were called and the patient received a caution.

The effects of abuse can have a lasting and profound impact on mental health. This is damaging for the individual and also impacts patient care. It can also result in dental professionals needing to take time off work, and even quitting dentistry altogether. Indeed, in our survey nearly a third of the dental nurses (32%) said increasing abuse or intimidation from patients has made them reconsider their career in dentistry.

We simply cannot afford to lose skilled and committed dental nurses. At Dental Protection we are calling on Police and Crime Commissioners, and police forces across the UK, to be aware of this threat and consider what can be done to support local dental practices by offering practical advice

such as recognising early warning signs or implementing de-escalation techniques.

The UK has a zero-tolerance policy in place with regard to abuse, aggression and violence. It is vital that this policy is rigorously enforced so the whole team feel their safety is the first priority. The policy must be visible to patients and should emphasise the importance of mutual respect between staff and patients. We also encourage practices to provide a forum where those who witness or experience any kind of abuse from patients can talk openly about it and seek appropriate support, rather than bottle things up or accept it as 'part of the job'. The whole team needs to be aware of what support is available and how to access it.

Every possible step to tackle abuse must be taken and at Dental Protection, we will continue to raise this issue on behalf of dental nurses. I would also encourage members experiencing work-related stress to make use of our 24/7 counselling service, provided through a third-party partner and completely confidential: <https://www.dentalprotection.org/uk/dentolegal-advice/counselling-service>.

