

COMPLAINTS ABOUT NHS DENTAL PRACTICES ON THE RISE

Complaints about NHS dental practices have risen by two-thirds with access, treatment, and fees common causes for concern, according to England's Health Ombudsman.

The number of complaints to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) about dentists increased by 66% from 1,193 in 2017/18 to 1,982 in 2022/23.

The proportion of complaints being upheld or partly upheld after investigation by the Ombudsman has also gone up from 42% to 78% in the same time span. This is significantly more than the average uphold rate of 60% for all other NHS services.

The Ombudsman receives around 100 calls a week about issues relating to dental practices, such as people being removed from practices' lists of NHS patients, lack of NHS dentists, and poor treatment.

Ombudsman Rob Behrens said, 'Many of us will have read recent headlines of people removing their own teeth and seen images of people queuing outside practices for an NHS dentist. This shows in access problems, such as appointment availability and lack of treatment being a common issue in complaints brought to us.'

Cases upheld by the Ombudsman in 2023 include:

- A pregnant woman from Southampton who was forced to pay £1,045 for a private root canal treatment after her dentist failed to tell her that she was exempt from NHS fees so her treatment should have been free. After treatment, the dentist then failed to fit a crown within the 30 days as recommended by the private specialist, leaving the woman in pain and distress



- A woman was burned inside her lower lip during a root canal treatment at a practice in Birmingham. She was left in 'excruciating' pain for 13 days, couldn't sleep and could only eat soft or liquid foods such as eggs and soup
- A practice in Stockport said the price for a five-tooth bridge was £330 total, rather than £330 per tooth. If the patient had understood the real cost, he would not have agreed to his front tooth being removed in preparation for the bridge and would have considered other treatment options. He was left with no front tooth and had to have further work carried out by another practice to fix the gap.

Earlier in 2023, the Ombudsman gave evidence to the Health and Social Care Select Committee inquiry into dentistry. It was recommended that Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) should take the lead in removing barriers to accessing dental services. These barriers include poor information available via the NHS website and 111 about local NHS dental services and the imposing of unnecessary private costs for procedures that could have been completed on the NHS.

The PHSO also said that to address inequalities in oral health, Government's reform of the NHS dental contract should go further in improving information for patients. There should be a requirement for clear and current information on accessing a dentist in an emergency or out of normal service hours on the Directory of Services on the NHS website.

There also needs to be complete transparency over the costs of care. This includes more public information about NHS treatment bands, what does and does not meet the criteria for NHS treatment, and the options for private referral.

Mr Behrens added, 'Like many other areas of the NHS, dentistry is suffering from low morale, underfunding, and a recruitment and retention problem.'

'More needs to be done to tackle the serious issues in dentistry. Patients must be able to access quality care and be clear about what is and is not available to them on the NHS.'

'Dental professionals need to feel supported and that leaders in the NHS and Government understand the problems they are facing and are working towards a meaningful solution.'

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PRACTICE MANAGERS AND RECEPTIONISTS CAN NOW JOIN BADN

At their Annual General Meeting (AGM) held in London, members of the British Association of Dental Nurses (BADN) voted to allow non-clinical practice managers and receptionists to join as Associate Members.

This means that practice managers and receptionists will be able to take advantage of the many benefits conferred by membership of BADN: access to the members-only area of the website www.badn.org.uk with information and advice, to the quarterly digital *British Dental Nurses' Journal*, to the

Legal Helpline, the Health & Wellness Hub with counselling/support helpline, and to BADN Rewards – which offers a wide range of special offers and discounts on shopping, insurance, lifestyle, travel and much more.

BADN Associate Membership currently costs £30 per year. Practice managers and receptionists who are also Registered Dental Nurses have always been eligible for Full Membership; but as of 1 December 2023, those who are non-clinical are eligible for Associate Membership.

BADN Honorary President Joan Hatchard said 'We felt that the time was right to allow managers and receptionists to join BADN as Associate Members and take advantage of the many benefits of membership. We look forward to welcoming them to BADN and I hope to meet as many members of the dental team as possible during my year as BADN Honorary President.'

Practice managers and receptionists wishing to join BADN can do so at www.badn.org.uk/join.