

A mental health epidemic in a global pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of dentists in Wales. *Br Dent J* 2022; <http://doi.org/10.1038/s41415-021-3756-7>

There is an alarming mental health crisis within dentistry. A 2019 BDA paper on stress and burnout found that 43% of dentists felt that they could not cope with the stress of their job, and 17.6% had seriously considered suicide. With the COVID-19 pandemic likely increasing levels of psychological distress, a cross-sectional survey was carried out to assess the mental health impact on dentists in Wales.

Initially during lockdown, many dentists reported reduced levels of stress and valued time away from the surgery. However, as dentists returned to face-to-face care, stress significantly rose. Dentists in general practice were extremely worried about their finances and the uncertainty surrounding contract reform within the NHS. The patient backlog has also been of great concern, especially to those within the CDS where services such as general anaesthesia and sedation have been affected due to the need for these clinics to act as Urgent Dental Care hubs.

With the high potential risk of occupational exposure to COVID-19, standard operating procedures required enhanced levels of PPE when carrying out aerosol generating procedures. This has been challenging for clinical staff for several reasons. Initially, there were issues surrounding poor supply and often PPE was ill-fitting; for example, many women found gowns to be too large. Fit testing for masks required men with facial hair to be clean-shaven and respondents noted that, while necessary, it did impact their sense of identity and was a visual reminder of the pandemic. Long sessions in high levels of PPE resulted in many suffering from pain in their necks, backs and shoulders; this has been cited as a major reason for decreased motivation and morale within the workforce.

Due to increased pressures to meet targets and difficult working conditions, there have been many negative impacts upon dentists including disrupted sleep, lower levels of exercise and increased reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms; 40% of dentists reported drinking alcohol more frequently, over-the-counter painkiller use increased for 21% and many have reported an increased use of nicotine products. While this is concerning, it should be noted that many also made positive changes to their lifestyles to cope with stress, such as going for walks, practising yoga, meditation etc.

It is clear many are feeling the impact, but there seems to be an uncomfortable silence around our collective mental wellbeing. Dentists are continuing to go into work, even when not feeling mentally well enough, and do not raise their stress levels with their line managers, citing barriers such as confidentiality, lack of empathy, or simply not wanting to burden them with additional stress. One respondent commented 'everyone is coping but that's what we all want everyone else to think', which is perhaps a thought shared by many readers.

The study concluded that there has been a profound impact during the pandemic on the mental health of dentists in Wales. Working conditions have been extremely challenging, and there is much uncertainty surrounding the future of dentistry and how issues such as the patient backlog will be addressed.

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Like oral health, mental health has been an overlooked area of healthcare. This paper contributes to the growing literature on dentists' mental health, which has rightly become a focus for organisations within the sector. This reflects a wider societal shift in which taboos about mental health are being challenged and broken down. However, it is evident from various research studies that dentists and dental students continue to find it challenging to open up, and few experiencing psychological distress seek support.

The pandemic has clearly exacerbated long-standing problems, with dentists facing all of the same lockdowns, disruption, grief and loneliness as the general population, but while also having to deal with enhanced PPE, infection prevention and control guidance, backlogs, patient abuse, in some parts of the UK unreasonable NHS targets, and for private practices limited financial help.

The emergence of profession-led initiatives to provide support for dentists which have been designed by dentists has been heartening. Hopefully, this peer approach will lead more who are struggling to access the help they need.

These individual-level interventions are critical – sometimes life-saving – once someone has reached the point of psychological distress, but we need to prevent so many dentists from getting to that point. As found by this research and others,¹ dentists already use adaptive coping strategies to manage stress and safeguard their wellbeing. This includes self-care, but notably also means making different professional choices; reducing NHS commitments or leaving it altogether, specialising clinical skills, or branching out into non-clinical fields. A recent BDA survey found that the most common career intention among associates over the next five years was to increase their private commitment, with four in ten planning to do so.

There is ample evidence that NHS contracts are a major factor in the levels of mental ill health among the profession. The way NHS dentistry works needs to change, not just for the health of patients, but for the health of dentists too. ■

References

1. Gallagher J, Colonio-Salazar F, White S. Supporting dentists' health and wellbeing – a qualitative study of coping strategies in 'normal times'. *Br Dent J* 2021; DOI: 10.1038/s41415-021-3205-7.