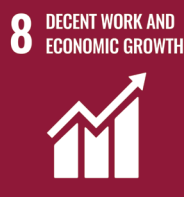


SDG COLUMN

Sustainable Development Goals in dentistry: addressing challenges for a healthier future



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Polly Bhambra¹ discusses SDG 8 in the context of the dental team itself, including training, career development, remuneration, working environments, burnout, and stress, as well as discussing implications of the NHS contract.

Dentistry in the UK is a multifaceted field that encompasses both the private and NHS sectors. While the private sector offers a range of services and treatments catering to those who can afford them, the NHS plays a critical role in ensuring access to dental care for all citizens. However, the challenges of providing decent work and economic growth in dentistry are more pronounced within the NHS due to the complex contractual arrangements.

Achieving sustainable development in dentistry is crucial to ensure that dental professionals can provide quality care, while addressing various challenges within the profession. In this article, I will discuss sustainable development goals (SDGs) within dentistry, focusing specifically on recruitment and retention.

Recruitment and retention

Recruiting and retaining qualified dental professionals is essential for the sustainability of dental healthcare. However, many practices are currently facing a recruitment crisis. A limited number of dental schools and training programmes can lead to a shortage of dentists and professionals in regions around the UK. Additionally, the high

educational debt incurred by graduates can deter them from working in underserved areas.

To address these issues, dental organisations and policymakers must align their efforts with SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing) and SDG 4 (quality education). Initiatives could focus on increasing the number of dental schools and expanding loan forgiveness programmes for dental students who commit to serving underserved communities.

Another underexploited resource is current dental practices. We at Treetops Dental Surgery are NEBDN-accredited, meaning we can train the next generation of dental nurses and get them fully up to speed in an area desperately in need of qualified dental nurses.

Training and career development

Continued training and career development are fundamental for dental professionals to stay updated with the latest technologies and techniques. The dental field is rapidly evolving, and ongoing education is essential to provide the best care to patients. Dental practices should invest in continuing education opportunities, mentoring programmes, and career advancement pathways to support dental professionals' growth.

These initiatives contribute to SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). This will foster a skilled workforce and promote lifelong learning.

Team dynamics

Effective teamwork is crucial in dental settings. Dental professionals collaborate closely to deliver comprehensive care. Poor team dynamics and poor goals can lead to errors, inefficiencies, and dissatisfaction among team members.

Dental practices should promote a collaborative and inclusive working environment. They can do this by emphasising communication, mutual respect, and shared goals. Team-building efforts align with SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing) by improving patient outcomes and SDG 5 (gender equality) by addressing gender disparities in the dental workforce.

Working environment

The pressure to meet NHS targets can lead to burnout and chronic stress among dental professionals. Burnout not only affects the wellbeing of the workforce but also compromises patient care. The mental and emotional toll of long hours, high patient volumes, and administrative burdens can have serious consequences on

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the quality of dentistry provided. Ensuring ergonomic workspaces, manageable patient loads, and a supportive work culture can mitigate these challenges.

In addition to this, within the NHS dental sector, practitioners are often constrained by the demands of the contract. There is a strong emphasis on meeting targets, such as the number of patients seen and treatments provided. This can lead to time pressures and a focus on quantity over quality, resulting in a less-than-optimal working environment. Dental teams may feel rushed, unable to provide the level of care they aspire to, and frustrated with the constraints placed on their practice.

Addressing the working environment aligns with SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing) by promoting the physical and

One major issue is the contractual framework, which prioritises targets over patient care and professional mental and physical wellbeing. Dentistry is a highly skilled profession that requires years of education and training. However, the current NHS contract often fails to adequately recognise and reward the expertise of dental professionals. This lack of professional reward can demotivate practitioners and lead to disillusionment within the field.

Addressing financial challenges aligns with SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) by promoting economic stability and reducing income disparities among dental professionals. The only way to remain profitable is to grow the private side of a dental practice. Therefore, I feel NHS dentistry is not adhering to SDGs 1 and 10.

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mental health of dental professionals, as well as addressing SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) by creating conducive working conditions.

Lack of remuneration and implications

The financial aspects of dentistry, including paying registration fees, indemnity, as well as the high cost of running a dental practice, can affect the financial rewards for those working within the profession. Policymakers, in particular the NHS, should work towards fair reimbursement rates, and explore innovative financial models to make dental practice more sustainable and financially rewarding.

The NHS contract for dental services is often seen as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it ensures that dental care is accessible to a broad spectrum of the population, regardless of their socioeconomic status. On the other hand, it can hinder economic growth and the creation of a conducive work environment for dental professionals.

NHS contracts, lack of time, and everyday limitations

In many countries, dental professionals work within the constraints of government-funded healthcare systems, such as the NHS in the UK. These contracts often come with limitations on treatment options, time constraints, and administrative burdens. NHS policymakers need to engage with dentists and dental organisations to ensure NHS contracts fully support quality patient care and provide adequate resources and flexibility for dental professionals.

These efforts align with SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing) by advocating for access to quality dental care and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals) by fostering collaboration between dentistry and government agencies.

Overcoming challenges and achieving SDG 8

Achieving SDG 8 within dentistry in both the private and NHS sectors requires a multifaceted approach. Here are some

strategies to address the challenges and promote decent work and economic growth:

- **Reforming the NHS contract:** a comprehensive review and reform of the NHS dental contract is necessary to prioritise patient care, reduce administrative burdens, and provide fair compensation for dental professionals
- **Embracing technology:** dental practices should invest in modern equipment and digital technologies to enhance patient care and improve efficiency
- **Workforce development:** encourage the recruitment and training of dental professionals, particularly in underserved areas, to address staffing shortages and reduce the burden on existing practitioners
- **Mental health support:** recognise the importance of mental health and wellbeing in the dental profession. Implement support programmes to help dental professionals cope with stress and prevent burnout
- **Professional recognition:** enhance the recognition and reward systems for dental professionals, acknowledging their expertise and contributions to healthcare.

Conclusion

SDG 8 calls for sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Achieving these goals within the field of dentistry, whether in the private or NHS sector, presents challenges related to the NHS contract, working environment, burnout, stress, financial implications, and a lack of professional rewards. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from policymakers, dental associations, and healthcare professionals.

By reforming contracts, embracing technology, supporting the workforce, prioritising mental health, and recognising professional expertise, it is possible to create a dental environment that aligns with SDG 8 and promotes a healthier, more sustainable future for all stakeholders involved. ■