

# Autumn Statement hits the vulnerable and offers nothing to ease access crisis



In November, the British Dental Association (BDA) condemned moves in the Autumn Statement that could withdraw free dental care from the long-term sick, while offering no additional resource to support the rebuild of NHS dentistry.

The BDA believes the threat to withdraw access to free NHS dentistry from those not actively seeking work will inevitably hit vulnerable patients with higher needs the hardest. Heavily briefed, dental care is thought to be among the 'additional benefits' set to be lost alongside free prescriptions and legal aid.

© Bob Primey/Stringer/Getty Images News/Getty Images Europe

The BDA believes the move will inevitably prove a repeat of the heavy-handed and ineffective approach taken to NHS fraud, which saw over £180 million in fines issued to innocent patients for 'misclaiming' free care to which they were fully entitled.

A recovery plan for NHS dentistry was pledged by the Government in April but remains undelivered. The lack of any dedicated funding in the statement suggests that when this plan is finally published, it will lack the material resources to make any meaningful headway on the current access crisis or halt the exodus of dentists from the service. As part of its damning inquiry into dentistry, the Health and Social Care Committee stressed any plan must have 'the scope and ambition required to immediately address the crisis of access people across the country are experiencing. This should be accompanied by the necessary funding and a plan for swift implementation.'

The service's budget has remained effectively static since 2010 at around £3 billion, which has translated into savage real-terms cuts. Many practices now face the prospect of delivering some NHS treatments, particularly those that require laboratory work like dentures or bridges, at a financial loss.

Neil O'Brien MP, the recently departed minister with responsibility for NHS

dentistry, said just days after his resignation, 'if such fiscal headroom is opening up, I hope the Chancellor will devote some of it to health – GPs and dentists could rapidly do more with some extra funds.'

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'The Chancellor offered no hope to the millions struggling to secure care. He failed to offer a penny to a service on the brink, just pulling away care from the patients who need us most. The Treasury will decide whether NHS dentistry has a future, but there's no sign this government is willing to step up.'

Neil Carmichael, Executive Chair of the Association of Dental Groups (ADG), said: 'The threat of removing access to NHS dentistry assumes that people can readily obtain these services in the first place – we know this isn't the case.'

'ADG's work on Dental Deserts shows that deprived areas are more likely to have shortages in NHS dentists. The "carrot and stick" approach to welfare reform will not work when most people are already failing to access NHS dental care.'

'Further affront is caused by the government's failure to announce any additional funding for NHS dental services in [the] Autumn Statement. As the government makes empty threats, NHS dentistry continues its fall into decay.' ✦

## Sugar levy delivering the goods in fight against decay

The British Dental Association (BDA) has said new evidence on the huge gains made in the fight against tooth decay secured by the sugar levy show how the Government must remain willing to force the hand of the food industry on reformulation.

Using data on hospital admissions for tooth extractions caused by decay, new research published in *BMJ Nutrition, Prevention & Health* suggests that 22 months after it was implemented, the Soft Drinks Industry Levy was associated with a 12% reduction in admissions amongst children aged 0 to 18 years.<sup>1</sup>

Tooth decay is the number one reason

for hospital admissions among young children, with over 42,000 extractions taking place in NHS hospitals in England last year on patients aged 18 or under.

The levy took out 47,000 tonnes of sugar from soft drinks in its first four years as it encouraged drinks manufacturers to reduce sugar levels to avoid the tax. The BDA stress its effectiveness is in sharp contrast to voluntary appeals to the food industry from the Government.

The BDA believes expansion of the levy into other product ranges – including milk-based drinks, biscuits, cakes, sweets, yoghurts and cereals – would drive widespread

reformulation of high sugar foods and need not raise costs for consumers.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'The sugar levy is delivering the goods in the fight against decay, so it's time to double down.'

'This isn't about adding to the cost of living. When voluntary action has clearly failed, this shows government must force industry's hand on cutting sugar.'

### References

1. Rogers N T, Conway D I, Mytton O *et al*. Estimated impact of the UK soft drinks industry levy on childhood hospital admissions for carious tooth extractions: interrupted time series analysis. *BMJ Nutrition Prevent Health* 2023; doi: 10.1136/bmjnp-2023-000714.