

Distress call

Shaun Sellars continues his series on ethical dilemmas in dentistry which appears in every second issue of the *BDJ*.



As a rule, dentists want to do their very best for patients. We spend five years at dental school learning skills from the best in our field before launching into the world of NHS dentistry. Here, things can be very different. We must consider practice overheads, UDAs and appointment lengths, none of which were a factor while training. All the while, we're encouraged to learn additional techniques to offer new and improved treatment to patients. These extra pressures don't always allow us to practise how we want. And so starts the squeeze. How do we maintain a consistent quality of treatment, which takes time and effort to deliver, under increasing pressure to deliver on our targets as demanded by the NHS system?

It's here where we can start to experience moral distress, where we're expected to work in an environment that clashes with our personal values. It's an increasingly acknowledged healthcare problem, but it is rarely discussed within dentistry. We're all working hard at our jobs, and dentistry is stressful at the best of times. But if the system we're working in, or the people we're working for, doesn't allow us to carry out the dentistry we feel patients deserve, the moral distress amplifies the occupational stress we feel until it can become overwhelming. From here, it's easy to start cutting corners, often gradually to begin with and sometimes without even noticing. But these cumulative shortcuts can lead to a result of producing substandard care, often unknowingly, a process called ethical fading.

There's no easy solution to moral distress. It's usually caused by factors out of our control, especially if working in the target-based, underfunded NHS system. But talking about it to those in control is the first step to changing the system. Of course, dentists and those in charge are well aware of the failings of the current NHS dental contract, and there's no change in sight. So, what can we do on a personal level?

It's up to us to support ourselves and each other. We must constantly monitor our values and ask ourselves if we're working within that value set. And if not, what can we do about it? Do we change how we work or where we work? Can we change the system we're working in? And if we're at the head of a business or organisation, do we have organisational values, and are we sticking to them and showing the compassion to our staff and patients they deserve? And are we willing to listen to those who come to us raising issues? Or does our performance fade to an unacceptable level from where it isn't easy to recover?

And if we see that others are struggling, are we working in an environment where we can have an open discussion and offer help? Because the amplification of personal stresses by moral distress can lead to disastrous consequences.

BDA backs breakfast club brushing plan

This month the British Dental Association (BDA) has welcomed moves by Labour to roll out supervised brushing programmes in breakfast clubs.



Historic modelling from Public Health England indicates targeted schemes could generate £3.06 in savings for every pound spent in the short-to-medium term owing to reduced treatment need.¹

National programmes overseen by devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have secured record-breaking improvements in oral health, and elements have been adopted worldwide in countries ranging from Chile to Israel.

While some English local authorities have financed schemes, the UK Government has failed to even take forward historic pledges to consult on rollout.

BDA chair Eddie Crouch said: 'Supervised brushing is a tried and tested policy, that the Government's own modelling shows pays for itself.'

'It's a scandal that decay remains the number one reason for hospital admissions among young children.'

'Prevention isn't just better than cure, it's cheaper too.'

References

- Public Health England. Return on investment of oral health improvement programmes for 0–5 year olds. 2016. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80ee0bed915d74e6231403/ROI_oral_health_interventions.pdf (accessed January 2024).

BDA AGMs

The Middlesex and Hertfordshire Branch BDA AGM will be held on Thursday 15 February 2024 between 19:30–20:00 at DoubleTree by Hilton London Elstree, Barnet By-Pass, Borehamwood, WD6 5PU.

Join the Branch and other local dental professionals at 19:00 for a lecture by Eddie Crouch 'What's new in dentistry? An update from the BDA Chair' followed by the AGM and buffet (available to BDA members only).

For further information and to book please visit: <https://www.bda.org/learning-and-development/courses-and-events/>.

