

## 'Pure farce': Government explores 'non-van solutions'

The British Dental Association (BDA) is dumbstruck after Government, having promised a fleet of dental vans to ease the access crisis in rural England, has launched a pre-procurement exercise for 'non-van solutions'.

The document recognises the 'limited availability' of both dental vans and the workforce to man them, and asks third parties to explore 'other options such as (but not limited to), the provision of non-van solutions, including the use of local facilities for pop-up services'.

The document states 'we are keen to think creatively on how we can best support this target population.' The BDA is unclear if pop-up services would meet Care Quality Commission standards.

This is the latest blow for the Government's 'Recovery Plan', that the BDA

said was 'unworthy of the title.' Last month the Secretary of State had to correct the official record after informing parliament that the Plan was funded by £200 million in 'new' money. It is entirely funded by recycling underspends in the service's £3 billion budget, which has barely increased in a decade. The Government has tried claiming that 500 practices are now taking on new patients as a result of this package. The reality is officials have just changed the definition of 'access.' Previously practices would answer 'yes' or 'no' on whether they were taking new patients. They are now showing if they can take new patients 'when availability allows'.

The BDA has criticised policies such as dental vans, which while ideally suited for treating high needs populations like the homeless, appear geared towards giving government MPs lines to talk to on the doorstep at election time. Delivering

mainstream care in dental vans is not cost effective, estimated at 2.5 times the cost of high street practice.

A recent poll of dentists in England by the BDA showed just 3% think the plan will result in their practice seeing more NHS patients. Forty-three percent believe the plan will actually lead to their practice seeing fewer NHS patients. Only 1% of respondents believe the plan is capable of meeting the government's stated objective to provide NHS dental care to 'all who need it'.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'Every MP who boasted to constituents about these vans is going to have to wait on what "non-van solutions" this Government can come up with. This is pure farce. The Prime Minister pledged to restore NHS dentistry. The reality is a plan with no new money, no ambition, and now there aren't even any vans.'

## Investment in clinical academia needed to deliver dental expansion

The clinical academic workforce is ageing and without intervention to train and retain a new generation of dental academics, the UK risks its ability to contribute to scientific research, improve patient care and educate an increasing number of oral healthcare students as set out in the government's Long Term Workforce Plan.<sup>1</sup> New data published by the Dental Schools Council show that a quarter of the clinical academic workforce is now aged 55 or over.<sup>2</sup>

Clinical academics (CAs) are health professionals who undertake teaching and research alongside treating patients in the NHS. A large proportion of clinical skills education is undertaken by these staff who are often responsible for course design, leadership and delivery as well as contributing to NHS dental services. However, a quarter of dental clinical academics are now aged over 55, and this is greater at Professor grade with 57% of Professors aged over 55. This has almost doubled since 2004 (31%). As these academics near retirement, if the pipeline

of CAs is not maintained, delivering the ambitions of the Long Term Workforce Plan becomes far more challenging. The impact is not limited to education, as a decline in the CA workforce will have an impact on dental research which provides the evidence base for improved clinical practice.

There are positive trends highlighted by the survey. Dental general practice has doubled since 2014, and there have been increases in the number of CAs in Northern Ireland, South West and the North East. However, during the same period, there has been a decline in Wales, North West and the West Midlands with the latter experiencing a 42% drop since a decade ago. When comparing gender, the workforce is fairly equal overall however men are still more likely to hold senior grades compared to women, comprising 68% and 57% of clinical academics at the Professor and Senior Clinical Teacher grades, respectively. The data also highlight significant issues in relation to ethnic diversity within the workforce. Ethnic minority academics remain underrepresented especially among Black/Black British CAs (1% of the total FTE).

To support the growth of clinical academia it is important that academics have access to local Clinical Excellence Awards and are appropriately recognised through the National Clinical Impact Award scheme which has replaced the previous national scheme. The proportion of dental academics holding an award is decreasing, only 5% of clinical academics held an award in 2023 compared to 14% in 2014. Greater promotion and understanding of the career are also needed. In response to this, the Clinical Academic Training and Careers Hub (CATCH)<sup>3</sup> was launched in October 2021 to promote the role of CAs and support health professionals beginning their clinical academic journey.

Professor Kirsty Hill, Chair of the Dental Schools Council said: 'NHS dentistry needs reform and expanding the number of undergraduate oral healthcare students is part of that much needed recovery. This growth will require more staff to train those students and clinical academics are essential to delivering that education. ►►