

'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.¹ New data published by the Dental Schools Council show that a quarter of the clinical academic workforce is now aged 55 or over.²

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)³ 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. ►►

« The data show us that the academic workforce is ageing and as we look to future proof how we deliver dental care, now is the time to invest in clinical academia as part of the government's plans to recover and reform NHS dentistry. This includes providing adequate support and funding to early career clinical academics so that we have sufficient staff to replace the potential loss of expertise that may soon be retiring. Including clinical academics in discussions on contractual reform is also essential to ensuring academia is viewed as a valuable and rewarding career path.

'It is encouraging that there has been growth in general practice and some regional growth of clinical academics but a decline in other regions at a time when there are growing oral health inequalities is concerning. Gender disparities have improved greatly, but clearly more work is needed to support women to enter senior academic roles. There are also major ethnic disparities that need to be addressed, an issue not limited to clinical academia, but we need to better understand how to remove barriers that affect dental professionals from an ethnic minority background entering clinical academia.'

References

1. NHS England. NHS Long Term Workforce Plan. 30 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/nhs-long-term-workforce-plan/> (accessed April 2024).
2. Dental Schools Council. Clinical academic staff survey. Available at: <https://www.dentalschoolscouncil.ac.uk/clinical-academia/clinical-academic-staff-survey/> (accessed April 2024). ✦
3. CATCH. Available at: <https://www.catch.ac.uk/> (accessed April 2024).

Notice of death

We regret to announce the death of Baroness Gardner of Parkes (17 July 1927–14 April 2024), an Australian-born British dentist and Conservative member of the House of Lords. Baroness Gardner of Parkes was the first and only dentist to become a life peer in the House of Lords. She was a long-time officer and active member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Dentistry and Oral Health into her mid-nineties. ✦

Partnership will tackle stress and anxiety in dentistry



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The MPS Foundation has partnered with FDI World Dental Federation (FDI) on a project aimed to raise awareness of the importance of managing mental health and develop further resources for oral health professionals.

Dental Protection is a part of Medical Protection Society (MPS), which launched the MPS Foundation in 2022. It is a global not-for-profit research initiative that invests in research into patient safety and the wellbeing of healthcare professionals and teams. Now in its third year, it has already supported over 30 projects from across the world.

The FDI project – which is in its second phase – will run until December 2025. The project activities will revolve around the World Mental Health Day in October to raise awareness of and destigmatise mental health issues in dentistry. It will focus on dental professionals and students, promoting and extending the resources and tools created in the first phase of the project.

The successful first phase resulted in the production of an online mental health toolkit for dental professionals, dental practices and national dental associations, as well as resources like podcasts to address challenges faced by individuals and practices.

In the second phase, the project aims to:

- Raise awareness of the importance of addressing mental health issues and wellbeing for dental practitioners and

dental students, including the impact of patient dental phobia on practitioner mental health

- Challenge stigma by normalising the discussion of mental health issues around dentistry
- Develop resources and training materials for dental team members and dental students to address specific challenges
- Develop resources for patients, to prevent and manage dental anxiety and fear of visits to the dentist.

Dr Graham Stokes, dentist and MPS Foundation chair, said: 'We are pleased to partner with FDI on this important project to support dental professionals with mental wellbeing. The project sits well with the Foundation's and Dental Protection's objectives, and we look forward to seeing the insights that will arise from it.'

'Our research has shown that increasingly more dental professionals deal with stress, worry and anxiety, which can result in serious mental health issues. These situations can also affect the quality of care provided and negatively impact on patients' wellbeing.'

'All stakeholders in the dental profession have a responsibility to promote mental health and wellbeing for dental professionals and dental students who are exposed to high levels of stress and burnout.' ✦