

## **Peter Tatton, Hertfordshire Local Dental Committee Secretary - 11.11.21**

It's been a rough couple of years. As well as the historic difficulties in accessing NHS dentistry, there has been a Covid-related exacerbation. But the easing of restrictions doesn't mean it's "business as usual" for Hertfordshire dentists.

When reopening in June 2020, dentists were instructed to use enhanced infection prevention; there was a trade-off between Covid safety and patient need. The number of patients dentists could care for was slashed and the new rules governing dentistry created a substantial (and growing) backlog of need. At the same time, it made the dental teams' working life miserable, as they were forced to work in masks sealed to the face and dressed in protective clothing that felt like wearing a shower curtain.

Hertfordshire patients have not been well-served by the NHS contract. The actual amount of NHS dentistry a practice can deliver is determined by its NHS contract size plus the government's current Covid restrictions. That's why some practices have more space to treat patients on a private basis.

Many of the 180 or so practices in Hertfordshire have very small NHS contracts - or none at all. It can be difficult for the dental team to explain this situation, particularly when the balance of NHS and private treatment is different in surrounding counties. It causes frustration, anguish and annoyance for those seeking NHS care and the dental team.

The amount of work a practice can do is capped by the current much-criticised NHS dental contract (in place since 2006) under which dentists work. If dentists exceed their targets, they simply won't get paid for this extra work (and, since they are normally self-employed, this could put the viability of their practices at risk and jeopardise the livelihoods of their employed staff). If they don't meet their targets, they can face financial penalties.

That isn't much help to patients who are in pain or distress, but this is what the situation is. Since the beginning of the pandemic, practices with an NHS commitment have been asked to prioritise those in pain and care for vulnerable groups, over routine appointments. When you contact a practice, they will listen to your request (i.e. triage you) and those most in need will be offered an emergency slot. How soon this will be varies according to the size of the practice, NHS commitment, backlog of care and other patients' needs.

Like other frontline NHS services (such as GPs), dental practices struggle to provide immediate care to everybody requesting help. Dentists understand the frustration this causes patients. If you need an urgent care appointment, call practices early in the day, and be aware that they have limited numbers of urgent NHS slots available. Try to be flexible.

Since reopening, the pressure on the dental team has been immense. Reception staff are having a challenging time; they cannot make appointments appear beyond the practice's capacity and NHS contract. Please don't get angry with them.

Finally, there is nothing NHS dentists can do to change the system except join in with the BDA's ongoing campaign for reform. The best way to be heard for anyone who can't access NHS dentistry is to contact Healthwatch or write to your MP, explaining how urgent the need for change is.

### **Dental Tips**

- Brush all the surfaces of the teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste, including last thing before bed.
- Spit don't rinse any toothpaste left in your mouth; otherwise, you'll wash away the benefit of the fluoride, which makes teeth more resistant to tooth decay.
- Reduce your sugar intake and keep any sweet treats to mealtimes only to limit damage to teeth.