

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A thank you

Sir, Thank you for the very well written article 'mental health in dentistry'¹ and shining a light on an ever-increasing problem in our profession and in our society as a whole.

There are many aspects of the article which would resonate with individuals and different subpopulations within our workforce and each clinician would have probably faced many of said challenges at different stages of their careers. Speaking to and on behalf of older colleagues, dentistry has always been regarded as one of the most stressful professions and the risk of 'burnout' and depression has been ever present. Research is important as it sheds further light on the reasons why mental health and wellbeing issues are so endemic within our profession, and we can subsequently receive the support, as individuals that we so desperately need from our unions, regulatory bodies and the government.

I would like to share my personal struggles which I faced on a daily basis in the first few years after qualifying. There was always this fear of litigation (you

would hear the horror stories), the time pressures and the physicality of the job, amongst others, which became immediately apparent to me. However, it was an overall sense of being undervalued that really got to me. I would often struggle with the fact I would want to do everything for my patients to ensure they received the best level of care they possibly could. Often spending evenings and weekends planning cases, going on courses, reinvesting my income to improve my patients' experience and clinical outcomes when they came to see me. With this in mind, on a typical busy NHS day, I would hear the 'I hate coming to see dentists', 'I don't want to be here', 'gosh, this is extortionate (NHS)', or words to that effect several times a day – largely from new patients. It was this general perception that so many of our population have, who resent coming to see us, and show no respect for the years we have spent learning and perfecting our craft to get to this point in our careers. It would honestly get me incredibly down about my career choice. Speaking to colleagues in other countries, it became obvious that this was so much more

of a problem in the UK than worldwide.

I worked for five years in the NHS and decided to leave it based on a multitude of reasons but primarily this one. I think the NHS is one of the greatest organisations in the world (still) and being able to provide healthcare which is free at the point of access is aspirational to many countries, however I feel this is something a large percentage of the UK population now take for granted, devaluing it and the people working tirelessly within it. Whilst private dentistry to some extent provides a release from this, as you have quite clearly shown, mental health challenges are endemic within our profession and if anyone is reading this article and it resonates with how they are feeling, I would urge them to talk to somebody and make that change.

S. Chandarana, member of Denplan's next Gen Dentist Group, via email

Reference

1. Westgarth D. Mental health in dentistry: Has the profession opened up through the years? *BDJ In Pract* 2022; **35**: 18-22.

New figures show NHS dentistry 'on its last legs'

The British Dental Association says the latest damning data on NHS dentistry in England underlines the need for radical and urgent change.

Just a third of adults (34%) accessed NHS dental care in the 24 months to 31 March, with children seen in the last year at 44.8%. This compares to 49.6% for adults, and 58.7% for children in the last full year prior to the pandemic.

In 2021-22 just 26.4 million courses of NHS dental treatment were delivered. This is just two-thirds (67%) of the average volumes delivered annually in the five years prior to the pandemic, 39.4 million. Since 1 April, dentists have been compelled to hit 100% of pre-pandemic activity, but the BDA understands there have been no gains in terms of the volume of NHS dentistry delivered.

Over a year's worth of NHS dental appointments have been lost since

lockdown, creating a backlog that will take years to clear, with patients now presenting with higher levels of need, having stored up problems as a result of ongoing access problems.

Recent BBC research has underlined the scale of the crisis, with nine in ten practices reported as unable to take on new adult patients on the NHS. The Health and Social Care Committee was warned in May that NHS dentistry in England faced a 'slow death', with endemic recruitment and retention problems fuelled by the discredited target-based contract. The Committee dubbed the contract 'not fit for purpose' and has pledged a dedicated inquiry.

While both contenders for the Conservative leadership have pledged urgent reform of NHS dentistry, there is no indication yet that the Treasury will be mandated to provide the funding needed

to underpin the rebuild and reform of services. The current system funds care for only half the population. After a decade of savage cuts, the BDA estimate it would take an extra £880m a year simply to restore resources to 2010 levels.

Recently announced 'tweaks' to the NHS contract have had no new funding attached, and the BDA argue changes will do nothing to meaningfully expand access or halt the exodus from the NHS.

BDA Chair Eddie Crouch said: 'What we're seeing isn't a recovery, but a service on its last legs.'

'The Government will be fooling itself and millions of patients if it attempts to put a gloss on these figures.'

'NHS dentistry is lightyears away from where it needs to be. Unless Ministers step up and deliver much needed reform and decent funding, this will remain the new normal.'