

NHS Dentistry: Scottish Government plans set to spark exodus from service

The British Dental Association has warned the Scottish Government plans to revert to pre-COVID-19 models of care risks sparking a flight of dentists from the NHS, with potentially devastating consequences for patient access across Scotland. In October Cabinet Secretary Humza Yousaf wrote to all NHS dental teams that all emergency support will be withdrawn by 1 April 2022. Since the first lockdown NHS practices have operated under a COVID-19 support package, reflecting pandemic pressures and tight infection control restrictions that continue to limit capacity across the service.

According to a new survey of dentists in Scotland, 80% of dentists estimate their practices will reduce their NHS commitment should the Scottish Government withdraw emergency support and return to pre-COVID-19 models of care. Over a third (38%) of dentists indicate they are now likely to change career or seek early retirement in the next 12 months should the policy be taken forward. 15% say they are likely to practice dentistry outside of Scotland, and 1 in 10 estimate their practice is likely to cease operations.

Half of dentists report that they are operating at less than 50% of pre-COVID

capacity. While the Scottish Government has offered a support package to boost capacity, many practices are unwilling to commit to a broken NHS model. Over 30% say they have not applied, and among those half (50%) say they are now unable to commit to the NHS long-term. Support for ventilation costs requires a minimum three year commitment to the NHS. Also 9 in 10 of dentists (89%) estimate the removal of emergency funding will have a high impact on the short-medium term sustainability of their practices.

BDA Scotland have warned from the outset that a return to a 'business as usual model' – low margin and high volume – will put practices under unsustainable financial pressure and will likely lead to closures or movement to the private sector. Practices are facing an unprecedented backlog, with recent data from Public Health Scotland indicating that the number of treatments delivered in the year to March 2021 was less than 25% of those delivered in the previous 12-month period, corresponding to over 3.5 million appointments lost as a result of the pandemic.

NHS dental care free at the point of use remains a centrepiece SNP policy. BDA

Scotland has said the Scottish Government must change course to achieve that goal, develop an interim funding package to support dentists and their teams as they work through the backlog, and begin work on a new, sustainable model for delivering care.

David McColl, Chair of the British Dental Association's Scottish Dental Practice Committee said: 'Free NHS dentistry for all is a worthy ambition. Rather than exploring ways to actually achieve that goal the Scottish Government has blindly headed down a road that could destroy this service.'

'COVID-19 has slashed our capacity, yet emergency support will end. Yes, Ministers have offered some support, but with small print many practices simply could not sign up to in good conscience.'

'Dentists are unwilling to be shackled to a corpse. When aid hinges on committing to an NHS model that is now frankly unsustainable it is unsurprising take up appears so modest.'

'We doubt Humza Yousaf wants to be remembered as the man who killed NHS dentistry in Scotland. Without a willingness to reflect on choices made in recent weeks that risks being his legacy.'

Dental funding boost mustn't forget services for Wales' most vulnerable

The British Dental Association Wales has welcomed commitments for additional funding for high street NHS dental services, but stressed support must also be provided to community services, treating the nation's most vulnerable adults and children.

Minister for Health and Social Services Eluned Morgan MS has pledged additional

funding for access to NHS dental services in Wales, allocating up to £3m to Health Boards in 2021-2022 to expedite the recovery of services and bolster urgent and emergency care and an additional £2m in recurrent funding from 2022-23 to allow Health Boards to increase access and capacity needs over the medium term.

While BDA Wales has welcomed the additional support, it has emphasised it is unlikely to prove a game-changer as long as strict pandemic protocols remain in force. These include maintaining gaps of up to an hour – known as fallow time – between most treatments, that have slashed capacity across the service. The length of these gaps can be reduced by high-volume ventilation.

There are no indications additional funds will be made available to community dental services. While NHS high street practices have already been offered capital funding

for ventilation upgrades, it has not been offered on the same basis to the community services, treating those who cannot be cared for in mainstream settings. Yearlong waiting times for treatment were not uncommon in community services pre-COVID-19.

Katrina Clarke, Chair of the BDA's Welsh Council said: 'This is a welcome investment but is unlikely to be a game-changer for high street dentists, who are still working to tight restrictions that set clear limits on the number of patients they can treat.'

'However, Ministers must recognise the community dentists treating the most vulnerable in Wales need to be thrown a lifeline. Colleagues are delivering care to patients with complex needs out of premises that are in dire need of upgrades, particularly when it comes to ventilation.'

'Yearlong waiting times will remain the norm until we see comprehensive support.'

