

The Voice of Scottish Dental Practice Owners



Dt: 02/12/2024

Ms. Clare Haughey MSP
The Convenor, Health, Social Care and Sports Committee,
Scottish Parliament,

Dear Ms. Haughey,

Thank you for your recent letter requesting further information on dental reforms in Scotland.

Background: In Dentistry best practice is continually evolving in line with global science and technology. The economic impact of this on Dental practices throughout Scotland needs to be addressed. If not, our members may not be able to continue to deliver a cutting-edge level of care to the Scottish population through NHS General Dental Services. In fact pre-COVID the investment in NHS Dentistry (General Dental Services) was already insufficient to keep Scottish oral health on par with world class standards, as referred to in our Position Papers (2021) and Scottish Government's own Oral health for all by 2020, published in 2013.

We appreciate the Scottish government has recently taken steps to improve the situation however, unless you are prepared to make significant changes to the remuneration of the current system, we will never be able to deliver a world class service. In addition to this, due to Post Brexit foreign dentist application processing and the fact that new graduates are increasingly moving into the private sector, we will never have enough practicing dentists within NHS to deliver the level of care you want for our population. In addition to answering your question we would also like to address underlying issues within the current model, which have been, highlighted by SDPO for several years now.

1. NHS dental provision: NHS registrations have increased in many dental practices but equally there are many practices registering private and independent plan patients. The services that are available through NHS Dentistry are still too limited to make Scotland NHS dentistry a world class standard.
2. Scottish dental access initiatives' idea of promoting NHS dental service access, in remote areas, remains a challenge. The number of people who needs to be registered under that scheme within the set time and conditions within the initiative may need to be simplified to help boost the practices use the benefit. It is also essential to provide similar funding in urban and semi-rural areas to improve existing practice facilities to make Scotland NHS dentistry a world class standard.
3. We are currently unable to comment on the increase in uptake of NHS registrations within the public health service. This requires a collation of data held by practitioner services. SDPO does not maintain statistical data. We can confirm, not all practices are keen to register additional NHS patients.
4. In terms of the reforms introduced in November 2023, SDPO welcomes the positive steps towards improving the provision of NHS Dental Care, however this does not go far enough to make Scotland NHS dentistry a world class standard. The reasons are the continual rising costs of providing our services including higher wage demands by support staff and the recruitment challenges, complicated and lengthy processing of foreign dentists and UK graduates being attracted by the pay in the private sector. The current model still supports and promotes disease centred approach rather than a preventative approach.

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5. In relation to specific examples, an average NHS practice running cost range from £100 to £150 per hour based on the current level of staffing, facilities and overheads. The level of fees provided within the SDR (Statement of Dental Remuneration) promotes a treadmill approach and the system is stressful and inadequate. There is a fundamental issue of lack of consistent cashflow to run a NHS dental practice and this is the main reason cited by members considering leaving the NHS altogether. Scottish Government must use groups like SDPO to develop a model fit for purpose.

6. In terms of staffing, the reduced number of qualified dental graduates within the dental schools, both in Scotland and in the UK is a problem. The lack of European dentists applying for jobs here Post Brexit due to the enhanced visa requirements and the need for a separate immigration route required by non-EU dentists is a problem. The low fees, in the NHS dental sector, being insufficient to attract European dentists to come and work here is another problem. NHS practices cannot match the expectations from newly qualified Associates. Another critical factor, causing recruitment issue, is the Mandatory training required by qualified and trained dentists before they can practice NHS dentistry, if they do not possess Scottish VT number. This delays recruitment as well as puts them off choosing Scotland as an attractive destination.

7. In terms of dental professionals' satisfaction at work, this is rooted in the ability to provide excellent preventative NHS dentistry. Newer Associates would like to work in less stressful environment, treating fewer patients which under the current system invariably leads to longer waiting times for NHS treatment.

8. The 1.2% increase in the NI (employers) and the increased minimum wage from April 2025 without a relative increase NHS remuneration will put a further strain on practice owners' desire to stay in the NHS. There was a 6% increase in the dental remuneration, announced recently, but this does not mitigate the significant increase in the cost of delivery of service. We have continuously seen increase in material and lab costs affecting our members dramatically.

9. Scottish government recently provided free dental care for under 26-year-olds; this was again not factored into the NHS budget. This increases the pressure on the small General Dental Services budget.

It has always been stressed by SDPO that the best way to run a state-delivered health service is to focus on prevention. NHS dentistry current form is still focused on a disease centred model. Money is being spent on a treatment basis rather than prevention. There is no time allocated for NHS dental practitioners to encourage prevention. The data supporting the short, mid, and long-term saving and increase in nation health from this approach is growing and we seriously urge you to consider it as a matter of urgency.

Viable solutions: Our hope is that the Scottish Government read and act upon the research showing the health benefits to populations who live under a preventative model. We could be saving taxpayers significant funds and increasing Scotland's general health, at the same time, if you make these changes. Our members will commit to helping you transform Scotland into a world leading NHS. We will provide our expertise to make the changes we see as essential to delivering on that promise. We need you to understand that if you take this step with us together, we will take Scotland back to having one of the best standards of national health in the world.

Yours sincerely,

Atif Bashir and Girish Bharadwaj

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