New statistics claim an eight-year attendance low

Survey reports a decline in dental patient numbers

Dental attendance figures are in the spotlight again after a new survey claims that the number of patients visiting the dentist has hit an eight-year low.

The survey, conducted by YouGov on behalf of Denplan, asserts that the number of people who say they attend their dental practice every six months has dropped from three in five, to barely two in five people in just one year (from 66 per cent to 45 per cent), statistic show. Meanwhile the numbers of people who visit the dentist regularly are down to their lowest figure since 2001 (to 69 per cent).

The research, which was carried out as an online survey, looked into some of the reasons given for not attending the dentist, with finances being the biggest reason. More than 40 per cent of respondents said they couldn’t afford to go, with dental phobia (28 per cent) and lack of access (25 per cent) the next most given reasons.

Interestingly, it is reported that women are finding it hardest to prioritise their check-ups, with almost half saying they don’t have the funds to go (48 per cent) compared with just over a third of men (36 per cent).

Denplan’s CDO Roger Mathews, said: “It is clear that patients are finding cost an issue in the current economic climate. While this may not be a surprise, it is important that the dental team focuses on retaining their patients by offering a range of payment options. Our own internal research indicates that those patients using a payment plan are least likely to cancel or delay routine dental check-ups, while they provide the practice the peace of mind from knowing that they will be seen when they need to. Dentists working in the NHS treat around 250,000 patients every working day and our aim is to ensure that everyone who wants to see an NHS dentist can by March 2011.”

Dr Cockcroft added: “The tide is turning and access to NHS dentistry has been increasing steadily over the past year.

“Recent statistics from the NHS Information Centre showed an increase in numbers of dentists working in the NHS by 655 in 2007/08 and a further 528 in 2008/09. The number of people seen by an NHS dentist in a 24-month period has increased in each of the last five quarters, by a total of 93,000.”

A spokesperson for the British Dental Association commented: “Regular visits to the dentist are important to maintaining good oral health. As well as looking out for conditions such as dental decay and gum disease, dentists can also spot oral cancers, potentially saving a patient’s life. It’s really not a good idea for patients to avoid check-ups.

“Patients with concerns about locating an NHS dentist or charges should seek advice from NHS Direct. And there’s really no need for patients to be anxious. Dentists work hard to put patients at their ease, explaining the care they provide to the best possible experience.”

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