Dwindling patients access NHS dentistry

F ewer people are now seeing an NHS dentist than they were before the new dental contract was introduced in 2006, according to official figures.

More than 27m people visited their dentist in England in the two-year period ending December 2008, representing 55.4 per cent of the population.

But the figure was 900,000 less than the number seeing dentists before the new dental contracts were introduced in April 2006.

Findings from the NHS Information Centre revealed that 27.5m people saw a dentist in the two-year period ending in December 2008, a rise of 500,000 from the figure three months earlier in September 2008.

But the number of patients seen was still 5.1 per cent less than the figure in the two-year period ending 51 March 2006 when 28.1m patients were seen, immediately before the new dental contracts were introduced.


This represented a 1.1 per cent increase on the previous period ending in September 2008 but a 3.4 per cent decrease on the numbers of adults seeing a dentist in the two-year period before the introduction of the new dental contract.

The amount of children visiting dentists was also down by 200,000 (2.4 per cent) on the pre-contract figures.

John Milne, chair of the British Dental Association’s General Dental Practice Committee, praised the improvement in access during 2008 and said: ‘Although these figures mean that there are still many people who wish to access a dentist but cannot do so, the increased number of people who can is good news.’

He added however ‘as well as maintaining this improvement, it is also important that the Department of Health gets to grips with the problems facing dentists as they seek to provide care and work with them to embrace Lord Darzi’s vision and help them to deliver high quality care.’

The conclusions of the current inquiry into dental services being led by Professor Jimmy Steele, which are expected in the summer, will need to be the subject of consultation with the profession and any reforms arising from them will need to be properly piloted before they are implemented.

Chief Dental Officer, Barry Cockcroft, echoed his confidence that the NHS will continue to build upon this improvement and said: ‘Today’s data shows that over the last two quarters of 2008, the number of patients accessing an NHS dentist in a two year period increased by nearly 540,000’.

We want to ensure that every person who wants to access an NHS dentist is able to do so and have invested a record £2bn in dentistry and set up a national access programme to help the NHS deliver this. The tide is turning and we are now seeing access to NHS dentistry starting to increase.’

He added that in 2007/08 there were 655 more NHS dentists than the year before, and with 25 per cent more students each year since 2005, there will be more to come in the future.