Survey: access is still biggest problem for PCTs
Commissioning survey by the British Dental Association shows growing experience of commissioning staff

Ensuring that people have access to NHS dentists is still one of the biggest problems for primary care trusts, according to a recent survey.

The 2010 British Dental Association (BDA) Local Commissioning Survey found that significant challenges remain for the commissioning of dentistry in England, despite the growing experience of commissioning staff and consensus on priorities.

The research found that access to care remains the top priority for primary care trusts (PCTs) when it assumes its duties. The research served to illustrate the handover of commissioning responsibility must seek to ensure that experience is not lost.

Almost three-quarters said they needed additional support, with 18 per cent declaring they did not benefit from the expertise of a consultant in dental public health.

The research also identified significant under spending of dental budgets. Just under a fifth (16.4 per cent) of PCTs said they had spent less than 95 per cent of their ring fenced dental budgets in 2009/10, although it is not clear whether the remaining funds were completely unspent or diverted to non-dental spending.

John Milne, chair of the BDA’s General Dental Practice Committee, said: “This research illustrates the challenges that persist with the commissioning of primary dental care and underlines some of the issues the national commissioning board will face when it assumes its duties.”

He added: “It is clear that whoever is responsible for commissioning dental care must be properly supported and have access to appropriate expertise.”

The experience and knowledge of consultants in dental public health and dental practice advisers are particularly valuable in helping PCTs provide effective care to patients. This study stresses the gradual accumulation of experience by PCTs. Arrangements for the handover of commissioning responsibility must seek to ensure that experience is not lost.

Under the coalition government, the transfer of responsibility for dental commissioning will pass in 2012 from the PCTs to the national commissioning board. It is not yet clear whether the board will have regional offices and, if it does, how these will be organised across the country.

The University and NHS Salford are launching a two year project to prevent tooth decay in young children and babies. The project is in partnership with Salford City Council with funding from the National Institute for Health & Social Care. Children in the North West have one of the highest levels of tooth decay in England. The project aims to prevent, rather than cure, tooth decay by targeting the parents of babies and following them until the children are three years old. The participants will be split into three groups, all of which will have access to dental services via a dental practice linked to their local children’s centre. Two of the groups will be given an additional service. This will be either the application of fluoride varnish to teeth every six months or educational work with parents designed to establish good oral hygiene and diet routines.

The university will analyse data on the number of decayed, missing or filled teeth that children develop and use the results to decide which of the services is the most successful. Prof Cynthia Pine, the principal investigator and executive dean of the Faculty of Health & Social Care said: “A project of this size has never been carried out in very young children before. Our focus is to improve children’s dental health in Salford and I’m delighted we can work in partnership across the city.”

For more information or to take part call 0161 295 5985 or email fhsc-salfordbright.smiles@salford.ac.uk

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