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News & Opinions

No show charges to hit the Welsh

The Welsh Assembly Government is looking at introducing a ‘discretionary charge’ for patients who miss dental appointments.

The proposal was put forward by a task and finish group, which recently reviewed the current dental contract.

The idea has received universal support and, if implemented could eventually be extended to other areas of the NHS, including hospital outpatient appointments.

Stuart Goddes, director of the British Dental Association in Wales, claims his own practice lost up to three weeks’ worth of appointments in one year and said: ‘Charging is the only sanction that would be in any way effective’.

Jonathan Davies, policy and public affairs manager for the Welsh NHS Confederation, said: ‘Reasons for non-attendance may vary and are not always the patient’s fault.

However, simply forgetting to turn up for, or failing to cancel an appointment for reasons of apathy is increasingly unacceptable. The idea of introducing a discretionary charge in these cases may well help improve the current situation.

Edwina Hart, Minister for Health and Social Services, said: ‘At the end of last year I announced a review of the dental contract and the establishment of a task and finish group to look at a range of issues to improve the way in which the contract works.

She added: ‘The Review Group completed their work in July and submitted their report. It concluded that the dental contract is broadly a workable system, and one which, with amendment, can be further improved.’

After consultation, the group found there was strong support for proposed national guidance on termination and transfer of dental contracts and the need for help in the upgrade of dental surgery equipment to meet new statutory requirements.

The current review of Units of Dental Activity as the sole contract currency was also seen as a key area.

‘There is a sub group of the main Review which continues to work on these complex issues and I look forward to seeing their final report and implementation proposals,’ said Mrs Hart.

The Welsh Assembly Government will also be looking at consolidating and strengthening the Community Dental Service (CDS) as part of its commitment to refocus provision of dental services to provide a new emphasis on public health.

The Review Group recommended revised guidance on the role of the CDS and for the care of the vulnerable in society, including children from deprived areas and those people with special needs.

This guidance was published at the end of October and will strengthen provision of dental services for those most in need and support the development of the CDS.

The CDS is also delivering the National Child Oral Health Improvement Programme – Designed to Smile – which is at the centre of the National Oral Health Action Plan for Wales.

The first phase of the Designed to Smile programme commenced last month, and is already providing tooth-brushing programmes in well over 100 schools.

This will be rolled out steadily across the two super pilot areas covering North Wales, Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Merthyr Tydfil, Cardiff, and the Vale of Glamorgan areas. A number of schools in Swansea are also participating in the programme.

Mrs Hart added: ‘While the review of the dental contract and the subsequent consultation on its findings clearly shows that the dental profession wants to work with the current system there is still of course much to do. While we have stabilised NHS dentistry in Wales and built foundations for the future, we now need to ensure that the dental contract is working as well as it possibly can and delivering benefits to the public and those working in the dental profession.’

Dental students treat patients

The first cohort of dental students at Lancashire’s graduate entry dentistry programme have begun their second year of intensive training and are now treating patients on the NHS allocation list.

The 32 second-year students on the University of Central Lancashire’s BDS Graduate Entry Dentistry programme are now based in one of four brand new dental education centres situated in Carlisle, Accrington, Morecambe and Blackpool.

Lawrence Marr, head of the School of Dentistry, said: ‘The students have now started seeing patients who are currently on the NHS allocation list, under the close supervision of their tutors.

They will be carrying out simple routine treatments and emergency care, including scale and polishes, fillings and simple tooth extractions.

Research has shown that most dentists stay in the area in which they trained and so we hope to be able to provide more qualified dentists for the north-west and help allay the current shortage.

Since the students started in September 2007 they have had to develop their skills on simulators as well as learning the theory of dental practice.

The first year was based at the new £12.5m dental school in Preston, which was the first purpose-built dental school in the UK for over a century.

They have also had to pass 15 exams since January to ensure they are ready to see real patients.

Their clinical training will be supplemented by further lectures, some via video links with the School of Dentistry in Preston, Lancashire.