

NHS Dentist Consultation

Research study for
Overview and Scrutiny
May to June 2007

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Contents

1	<i>Introduction</i>	3
2	<i>Research Objectives</i>	3
3	<i>Methodology</i>	3
4	<i>Limitations</i>	3
5	<i>Main consultation findings</i>	4
5.1	Ease of registering with a NHS dentist	4
5.2	Reasons for not being NHS registered	5
5.2.1	Reasons for not having a dentist at all	5
5.2.2	Reasons for being registered privately	6
5.3	Problems experienced registering with a NHS dentist	7
5.4	NHS dental contract	8
5.5	Improvements suggested for NHS dental services	8
6	<i>Conclusions and recommendations</i>	10
7	<i>Appendix 1: marked up questionnaire</i>	12

Table of figures

Chart 1 -	How easy or difficult do you think it is to register with an NHS dentist?	4
Chart 2 -	Why do you say this?	5
Chart 3 -	What problems, if any, did you experience when you tried to register with an NHS dentist?	7

1 Introduction

The NHS dentistry consultation looked into public perceptions and experiences of NHS dentists in Lancashire, looking specifically at service provision. The results will be used by Lancashire County Council Health Scrutiny Councillors in their review of NHS dental services and when making recommendations to the NHS.

2 Research Objectives

The main objectives of the consultation were to find out perceptions of:

- how easy it is to register with an NHS dentist;
- why people aren't registered with a dentist;
- what problems they experienced when trying to register with an NHS dentist; and
- if the NHS dental contract has improved dental services.

3 Methodology

The NHS dentistry consultation was an online questionnaire hosted on the Lancashire.gov.uk website. The questionnaire was promoted through Vision, press releases, radio interviews and links from the lancashire.gov.uk website. Members of the public also sent in their comments by email and letter and these have been incorporated into the findings to provide additional context.

Fieldwork began on Tuesday 1 May 2007 and ended on Friday 29 June 2007. No incentive for respondents to complete the questionnaire was given and a total of 70 questionnaires were completed.

A marked up questionnaire of the survey results can be found in Appendix 1.

4 Limitations

As this is a piece of consultation the findings can not be taken as statistically representative of the wider population who could have completed the questions. Overall, there were a wide range of views and responses. The report tries to encapsulate the responses, but because of this, and the fact that the people who responded to the consultation are likely to be more active and vocal on the subject, they may not be representative of the population as a whole. However, it does provide a snapshot of public perceptions on the state of NHS dentistry and can be used to provide contextual information that supports other sources of information.

5 Main consultation findings

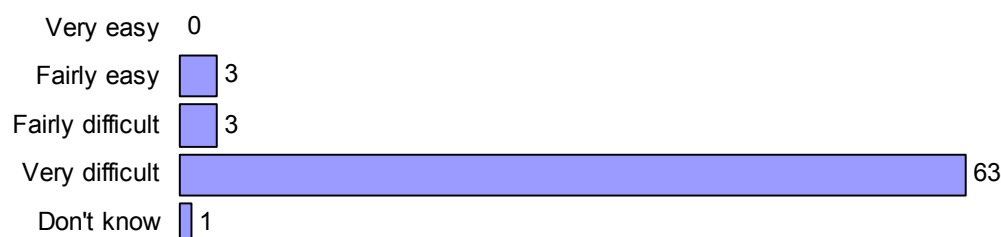
5.1 Ease of registering with a NHS dentist

Respondents were asked if they were currently registered with a dentist. The people who completed a questionnaire were fairly evenly spread between being registered with an NHS dentist (22 people), being registered as a private patient (27 people) and not being registered at all (21 people). Most people registered with a dentist between one and five years ago (25 people), very few registering in the last 12 months since the NHS dental contract was introduced (5 people).

The majority of respondents felt that it was very difficult to register with an NHS dentist (63 people), only three people saying that it was fairly easy. One person said “I have been completely unable to register my family with an NHS Dentist”. A number of people said that they “have the right to free dental treatment ... I find it difficult to save to pay for private dental care ... I am frustrated at the inability to find an NHS dentist”. One person said that in order to get a dentist “my family have to do a 120 mile round trip”. Another said that dentists are also feeling the pressure because the “NHS dentists (they) contacted seemed overwhelmed with waiting lists of people trying to register”. Respondents felt that it was difficult to register with a dentist regardless of if they have a private or NHS dentist or no dentist at all.

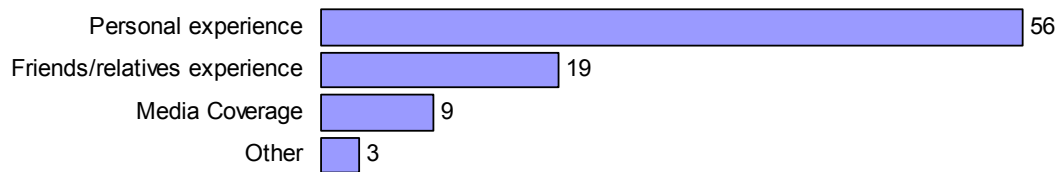
People had got these perceptions mainly as a result of personal experience (56 people) and the experiences of friends or relatives (19 people). They were less likely to say they have been influenced by media coverage.

Chart 1 - How easy or difficult do you think it is to register with an NHS dentist?



Base: all respondents 70

Chart 2 - Why do you say this?



Base: all respondents 70

Some of the comments added a context to this saying that it “(wasn’t) difficult ... (it was) impossible!!!” others suggesting that it was “because dentists are transferring to private schemes” and that “none (were) taking on new people”. One respondent said that “I am a Health Visitor and have families on my caseload who are unable to access an NHS dentist. Many of which are poor families with very poor dental hygiene.” Many felt that “it is disgusting that people who can’t afford to pay get nothing” and “to put it mildly it is a national disgrace that older people who need dentistry the most, have to suffer this way.”

5.2 Reasons for not being NHS registered

Respondents were also asked the reasons behind not being registered with a dentist and being registered privately.

5.2.1 Reasons for not having a dentist at all

Of the people who aren’t registered with a dentist the main reasons they gave were not being able to get an NHS dentist (18 people) and that going to the dentist was too expensive (5 people). People felt that “the other alternative to take out dental insurance (ie Denplan) at a cost of (approximately) £150 pa” was unaffordable. These reasons tie in with the reasons people gave for finding it difficult to register with a dentist: “the NHS Dentist my family were registered with went private and therefore we could not afford to pay”. Many people found it “unacceptable that I cannot find a dentist in the town that I live in”.

Other, less prominent, reasons were that they only go to the dentist in an emergency and that there isn’t a dentist in their local area – caused by their experience of dentists transferring to private practice meaning they “can’t find a local NHS dentist”.

5.2.2 Reasons for being registered privately

Of the 27 respondents who are registered as a private patient, most had tried to register with an NHS dentist (23 people). Almost three-quarters of respondents said that they registered privately because they couldn't get an NHS place "my existing dentist changed to private practice", and another couple of people didn't think they'd be able to get a place. This shows that private dental treatment isn't their preference as some comments highlight:

"Didn't have any choice. Was with NHS dentist and was told my family and myself had to go on his private register or get lost basically. Tried to find another NHS dentist in a 30 mile radius but with no luck. So it wasn't our decision".

"There isn't really any choice. If people want dental treatment they are almost forced to be private patients."

"I have been trying to register with an NHS dentist for two years ... NHS direct could only advice me to keep going back to check the website ... I find it unacceptable that I can no longer access an NHS dentist for preventative work. After all, I pay the same NI contributions as people who live in other parts of the country and who have easy access to NHS dentistry."

"I have been on the NHS Direct list awaiting to be contacted for the past 18 months and have heard nothing from them and have had to ask them for emergency treatment on two occasions - I am still waiting to hear from them."

5.3 Problems experienced registering with a NHS dentist

When respondents were asked what problems they had experienced when they tried to register with an NHS dentist the main problem they highlighted was there being no NHS places locally (41 people), and no NHS dentists locally (16 people). Again the comments from respondents highlighted the dentists changing to private practice causing this problem.

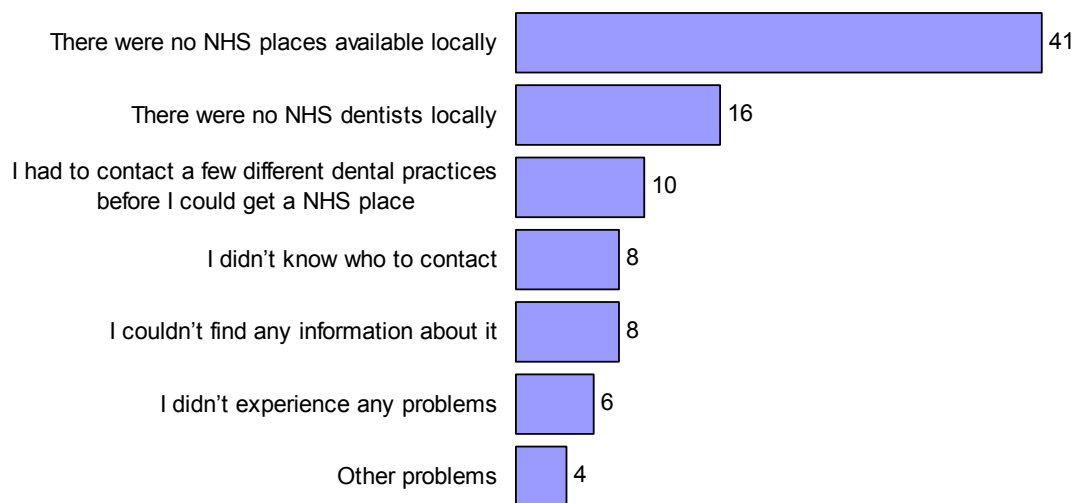
“There are no NHS dentists taking patients in Preston. I even went through NHS direct and they couldn’t find me one”.

“My own NHS dentist went private”

“We have been on a waiting list for about one year”

Even when people were able to get an NHS place they had to contact a number of different practices before they could get a place (10 people).

Chart 3 - *What problems, if any, did you experience when you tried to register with an NHS dentist?*



Base: all respondents 61

5.4 NHS dental contract

Respondents who were registered with an NHS dentist were asked what effect they thought the NHS dental contract had on NHS dental services. No one thought they had got better, the majority saying they had stayed the same (13 people) or got worse (6 people).

One respondent said that they managed to find an NHS dentist outside their area “but some time after this he started using a private monthly payment plan. I was told I could stay as an NHS patient but the service would be inferior.” Another comment received in a letter corroborates this because they were told by their dentist that they “would be leaving the NHS as the new contracts would not enable him to provide the preventative care that he firmly believed in”. This suggests that the NHS dental contract is actually causing dentists to leave NHS service.

A problem caused by the lack of NHS dentists seems to be the increased workload on dentists who do NHS treatment – it makes them “extremely busy which takes a very long time to get my treatment” and emergency dental services are “struggling to keep up with the demand”.

5.5 Improvements suggested for NHS dental services

The importance of improving NHS dental services was highlighted by a number of respondents.

“I think its absolutely disgusting in this day and age that people of all ages are walking round with rotting teeth, too scared to go to the dentist for fear of what it is going to cost.”

“Never has so much funding been allocated to the NHS. It is now sixteen months since I received dental treatment. At this rate my teeth will have fallen out before I am allocated an NHS dentist.”

“You are simply rolling up dental problems for the future as children do not receive dental care.”

“NHS dentistry services should be provided locally for all as it is one of the most important personal health regimes ... without regular checks oral problems will not be caught early.”

“We’ve been living on promises for far too long now – it’s now that treatment is needed and many are helpless.”

“We are paying for NHS dentistry services regardless of if we are NHS or private patients.”

Respondents were given their suggestions for how to improve NHS dental services. The most mentioned thing they came up with was to stop dentists from changing to private practice. Some comments included:

“When a dentist is set up with NHS funding and accepting NHS patients they should not be allowed to change to private practice so easily ... without consultation from his patients.”

“No professionals should hold such a monopoly as to disable delivery of health care.”

“If they want to practice as a private dentist, then they should pay privately for their training!”

“Newly trained dentists must work for the NHS for a set period before being allowed to work for private dentists ... any treatment available on the NHS is better than no treatment at all.”

“I have, as advised, contacted NHS Direct and Primary Care Trust and all I have been offered is treatment (when I am in pain) at either Chorley hospital at night or weekends”.

“The NHS dentistry is not working and needs a major rethink and overhaul to make it a reality instead of a myth!”

One of the other main things suggested were to improve the registration process, reduce the waiting times, promote the places available with NHS dentists and make sure the information they put on websites is up-to-date. Many people had been waiting over a year to get a place with an NHS dentist and had to keep re-registering because “the first time was ‘mislaid’” or they have “contacted NHS Direct who have twice taken my details and passed the on to the relevant trust who have then proceeded to ignore those details”. People also said that they have to keep chasing progress up “each time I contact the relevant body I am told it will be another 6 months”. Someone said that “I think the only way for me to find an NHS dentist is if I persistently hound the NHS Direct Service and the PCT ... (they) hope that people will eventually just give up and go away and let their teeth rot or like myself pay for dentistry.”

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Questionnaires were available to complete online and comments were invited from members of the public from an article in Vision, press releases and radio interviews. In total 70 questionnaires were completed.

When looking at the results it should be borne in mind that the findings may not be representative of the population as a whole because the number of responses is low and the people who responded are likely to be more active and vocal on the subject. However, it does provide a snapshot of public perceptions on the state of NHS dentistry and can be used to provide contextual information that supports other sources of information (eg the Life in Lancashire results).

Overall respondents felt that it was very difficult to get a NHS dentist regardless of whether they had a dentist or not. These perceptions came as a result of personal experience – either their own or that of their friends or family.

The reasons people gave for being registered privately or not having a dentist at all was because they hadn't been able to get an NHS dentist. The general feeling was that the lack of NHS dental places was caused by dentists transferring to private schemes meaning that there are no NHS dentists or places locally. Even when people did manage to get a NHS place they had to contact a number of different practices before they succeeded.

When asked about the NHS dental contract people felt that it hadn't had any effect on the service, and some people even felt that it had got worse. One respondent commented that their dentist had said they "would be leaving the NHS as the new contracts would not enable him to provide the preventative care that he firmly believed in".

A problem caused by the lack of NHS dentists seems to be the increased workload on dentists who do NHS treatment – it makes them "extremely busy which takes a very long time to get my treatment" and emergency dental services are "struggling to keep up with the demand".

The overall feeling was that NHS dental services needed to be improved, particularly as people aren't going to the dentist at all because of the cost and are suffering health problems as a result. It was felt it was most important to stop dentists changing to private practice and make sure newly qualified dentists work for the NHS for a minimum length of time. They wanted an NHS dentist that they could go to locally and that weren't "overwhelmed with waiting lists of people trying to register".

They also wanted the registration process to be improved and simplified, the waiting times to be reduced, more promotion of places available with NHS dentists and to make sure the information on websites is up-to-date.

Look at the effect of the NHS dental contract in more detail with patients and dentists to see if it is having the desired effect. The comments from this survey suggest that availability of NHS dental places and the service hasn't improved.

7 Appendix 1: marked up questionnaire

All values are given in counts

Base: all respondents (70) unless otherwise stated

Q1	How easy or difficult do you think it is to register with an NHS dentist?	
	Very easy	0
	Fairly easy	3
	Fairly difficult	3
	Very difficult	63
	Don't know	1

Q2	Why do you say this?	
	Personal experience	56
	Friends/relatives experience	19
	Media Coverage	9
	Other	3

Q3	Are you currently registered with a dentist?	
	Yes, as an NHS patient	22
	Yes, as a private patient	27
	No	21

Base: all respondents registered with a dentist (49)

Q4	How long ago did you register with your current dentist?	
	Less than a year ago	5
	1 to 5 years ago	25
	6 to 10 years ago	10
	More than 10 years ago	9

Base: all respondents not being registered with a dentist (20)

Q5	Why aren't you registered with a dentist?	
	I couldn't get an NHS dentist	18
	Going to the dentist is too expensive	5
	Other	1
	I only go to the dentist in an emergency	1
	There is no dentist in my local area	1

Base: all respondents registered with a private dentist (27)

Q6	Did you try to register as an NHS patient?	
	Yes	23
	No	4

Base: all respondents registered with a private dentist (25)

Q7	Why did you decide to register privately?	
	I couldn't get an NHS place	18
	Other	4
	You get a better service privately	3
	I didn't think I'd be able to get an NHS place	2
	The dentist was easier to get to	1
	It was easier	1

Q8	What problems, if any, did you experience when you tried to register with an NHS dentist?	
	There were no NHS places available locally	41
	There were no NHS dentists locally	16
	I had to contact a few different dental practices before I could get a NHS place	10
	I didn't know who to contact	8
	I couldn't find any information about it	8
	I didn't experience any problems	6
	Other problems	4

Base: all respondents registered with a NHS dentist (22)

Q9	In April 2006 there was a new NHS dental contract introduced. Has the NHS dental service got better, worse or stayed the same in the last 12 months?	
	Got better	0
	Stayed the same	13
	Got worse	6
	I haven't been to the dentist in the last 12 months	2
	Don't know	1

Q11	Are you ...?	
	Male	35
	Female	34

Q12	What age group do you fall into?	
	Under 25	1
	25 to 44	28
	45 to 64	34
	65 or over	6

Q13	Do you have any illness, injury or condition that...	
	is long-term and affects your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities	6
	is long term but does not affect your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities	11
	has affected your health for at least a month but is not expected to last for 12 months	2

Q14	To which of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?	
	White	66
	BME	4