

Friday, 27 March 2020

Mr Robin Swann MLA  
Minister  
Department of Health  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast  
Northern Ireland  
BT4 3SQ

Re: COVID 19 Support measures

Dear Minister

Firstly, on behalf of the general dental profession may I offer you and Health and Social Care our full support in these difficult days. I know a large number of dental colleagues have responded positively to the call to staff emergency dental clinics, to be online in the coming days.

I thank the Department and HSCB for its stated commitment '*in wanting to ensure that when this terrible outbreak passes, dental practices and the GDS as a whole are able to return to normal levels of access and activity*'. The letter from Paul Montgomery, DoH last Friday announcing the general principles of financial support to general dental practices by continuing 80% of Item of Service payments was an important part of that process.

However, I do want to highlight to you the complex 'hybrid' nature of many dental practices in Northern Ireland, most of which offer some component of private care that sits alongside Health Service dentistry. Practices may be 50%/50% split equally between private and NHS; they may be mainly NHS, or mainly Private.

Regardless of split, the reality is that individual businesses -and practitioners -have lost access to *both* sources of income at the one time, and business decisions have to be taken accordingly. While practices may want to furlough off employed staff such as dental nurses under the terms of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, they also do not want to contradict the terms of the DoH practice support scheme. For single small businesses, this puts them in a very difficult situation, and the longer the uncertainty goes on for, the more profound the impact will be.

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A key concern is that if businesses with a significant proportion of private income were to be denied access to sufficient support, this will have knock-on impact on the provision of health service dentistry in the post-COVID context.

We ask that as the detail is worked up for the DoH practice support scheme that supports will be flexible enough to keep practices from being forced to shut, and that access to one scheme does not preclude access to wider support measures. Indeed, the letter issued by your Department last Friday referred to the expectation that dental practices will be eligible for support from the UK-wide measures and additional support offered by the NI Executive, as well as DoH cashflow supports. We would ask that this will indeed follow through.

We know by working together, practical solutions to all of these issues can be found. They are not insurmountable and are vital to maintaining the survival of all dental practices in Northern Ireland.

Looking forward, the time is right for us to step up to the mark to look after our patients, wherever we are needed. We rely on the Department and HSCB to look after us, in ensuring we have practices to go back to once this is all over.

Yours sincerely



Richard Graham  
Chair, Northern Ireland Dental Practice Committee