

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinnystríe D Póistíe

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Dear *Richard,*

I am writing in reply to your letter of 24 April 2020 in respect of the General Dental Services (GDS) Financial Support Scheme (FSS) as well as the general administration of dental services within the Department of Health (DoH).

The FSS was established at short notice with the aim of fairly supporting General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) in response to the expected reduction in dental activity levels due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Strenuous efforts were required to ensure that the payments under the scheme could be made on the same date as GDPs would receive their normal payments.

The total amount GDS payments made to NI dentists in April 2020 was £7.9 million compared with £6.4 million in April 2019, in the context of a reduction in dental activity. The GDS payments in April 2020 include £2.6 million from the FSS. The payments under the scheme are expected to increase next month as fewer Item of Service (IoS) claims are made for dental activity undertaken before the outbreak. I would hope that you would agree that this represents a significant financial commitment to dental services by the Department during the COVID-19 outbreak.

You will be aware that the FSS payment for each GDP is based on their average monthly IoS payment in 2019-20. Although this is fair and reasonable for most GDPs, in developing the scheme it was recognised that this approach would not be appropriate for those who had maternity, paternity or long-term sick leave last year. In response, the original approach in calculating the 2019-20 monthly average was to disregard the months in which no claims were made last year. This was clearly set out in the guidance for the scheme that was published on 7 April 2020.

However, there are a number of GDPs who made IoS claims last year when they were on

maternity leave which has acted to reduce their average payment in 2019-20. This has meant that those GDPs did not receive a level of monthly payment in line with that which would have been expected in the absence of COVID-19.

The Department was made aware of the issue on 21 April 2020 and began an immediate review to identify how it could be addressed. The outcome of this review is that the approach will now be amended so that the average payment calculation will exclude the months in which a GDP received a maternity payment, rather than months in which there were zero payments. Although this revised approach will formally apply in respect of the next monthly payment under the FSS, a supplementary payment will be made as soon as possible to the GDPs affected so that it is reflected in the total amount of payment they receive this month.

On 24 April 2020 the British Dental Association (BDA) was provided with a draft of the letter to be issued to GDPs informing them of the change in the approach, which would also apply to those who received long-term sickness payments in 2019-20. The offer was made by DoH officials to discuss this letter with the BDA including consideration of a small number of individual cases in detail. DoH officials have also committed to engage with the BDA on the other categories of cases where further refinement to the scheme might be appropriate. I think that this clearly shows that the Department does engage effectively with the dental community and does react appropriately when presented with objective evidence.

Whilst I have received correspondence from local political representatives in respect of financial support during the COVID-19 outbreak, this has been mainly in respect of practices with a high proportion of private activity and their eligibility for the Self-employment Income Support Scheme. I understand that the BDA is lobbying politicians across the UK separately on this matter. You will appreciate that responsibility for this scheme lies with HM Treasury and not the DoH.

More generally, in light of the longstanding constrained financial environment and the needs of the health & social care sector, it is important that the resources available to DoH are focused on frontline service delivery rather than administration. However, additional capacity has recently been put in place in respect of dental services within DoH.

You will be aware that it was not possible to take forward the implementation of the recommendations from the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists Remuneration (DDRDB) until Public Sector Pay Policy was set for NI Departments by the Department of Finance. There were also further complications which meant that it was not possible to secure the formal approval of the recommendations until the start of 2020. Furthermore, the COVID-19 outbreak has resulted in additional delay as it was necessary to prioritise the development of the FSS, which does incorporate the DDRDB recommendations. The backpay element of the DDRDB recommendations will be processed as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Robin Swann MLA
Minister for Health