

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health

by email

15 September 2020

Dear Secretary of State

Waiting times for dental treatment under general anaesthetic

There is a significant problem in waiting times for patients requiring general anaesthetic (GA) dental treatment in England, leaving vulnerable adult and child NHS patients in immense pain and distress. Pre-COVID some people waited over a year for GA procedures¹. Vulnerable adults frequently have a complex mix of medical conditions, often including autism and learning disabilities, with some people unable to communicate the fact that they are in pain. Meanwhile children who need teeth taken out under general anaesthetic are waiting upwards of a year for treatment. Many of them have required multiple courses of antibiotics during this time to fight infections. This is a real concern for members of the dental team, as oral health can impact on general health and the current situation is leading to the widening of health inequalities. This unacceptable delay in accessing dental care must not be allowed to continue.

We have raised this issue repeatedly with NHS England. Meanwhile the situation has continued to get worse, so we are asking you to step in to resolve this problem as a matter of urgency. The primary care community dental service needs more access to operating theatre time to treat these patients and there will be inevitable consequences for the hospital dental services. In the period March to May 2020 over 50,000 children in England had surgery from all surgical specialties postponed². Tooth decay is still the most common reason for hospital admissions among children aged 5-9 years old, so many of these children will be waiting for dental extractions. There is an urgent requirement to re-establish elective children's surgical services and at a level to cope with this backlog. Your duty as Secretary of State is to secure the improvement in the physical and mental health of these people and the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of physical and mental illness. Please help us to help these people from being failed further by demanding that this issue be addressed by the Department of Health and NHS England and NHS Improvement. Furthermore, we ask that the pending Public Health England review into the true state of dental GA activity be published immediately. Only then will the real picture become clear, allowing for appropriate planning for the future.

¹ BDA FOIA requests 2018

² <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/generatedpdf/document/National-guidance-for-the-recovery-of-elective-surgery-in-children.pdf>

The situation was bad before the COVID-19 pandemic; waiting times for this complex treatment were already around one year. With many of these adult patients unable to allow swabbing preoperatively for COVID testing, each patient will need to be treated as COVID-19 positive, putting existing resources under even greater strain. It should be remembered that reasonable adjustments are a legal requirement for people with protected characteristics. Operating capacity is already significantly reduced to around 50-75% of pre COVID-19 levels, due to social distancing and COVID-19 infection prevention control procedures. Across the health service now, backlogs are being tackled. Further delays here are unacceptable for vulnerable patients who have already waited a year for dental treatment.

Often these patient groups cannot advocate for themselves and therefore we must advocate on their behalf. A whole year in pain with trouble eating, speaking, sleeping is unacceptable for anyone, let alone our most vulnerable patients – and this is set to get worse. We must not let these groups of patients down. Together we must work to find and implement solutions. This must be done now. We would be pleased to discuss this matter further with you and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely



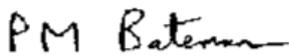
Mick Armstrong
Chair
BDA



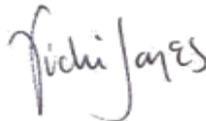
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cc: Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, Chair, Health and Social Care Select Committee