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Martina Smith,
Deputy Head of Commissioning
NHS England and NHS Improvement - Midlands
By Email

21st January 2020

Dear Martina,

Dental Services during the Covid-19 pandemic

In response to a request for feedback from NHS England and NHS Improvement in the Midlands we ran a short online Survey, based on one produced by Healthwatch Herefordshire, between 10th November 2020 and 4th January 2021 to gather feedback about dental services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We had 96 responses. Most respondents were female (61) and aged over 55 (64). All the respondents defined themselves as White British or White Irish.

Private and NHS dentistry

Most respondents (70) had an NHS dentist and were happy with that choice (61). A few (4) had an NHS dentist but would have preferred to see a private dentist if they could afford it.

21 respondents had a private dentist, and 12 were happy with that choice. 8 people told us that they would like to have an NHS dentist if this was available to them.

5 people were not with a regular dentist.

Urgent dental treatment

27 respondents had needed urgent dental treatment since March 2020.

15 of these required this between March - June 2020, covering the period of the first national "lockdown", when most high street dentists were closed for routine face to face appointments for an 11 week period.

Although people reported that they could not be seen by their regular dentist, from the responses most people had been able to access advice and information from their dentist over the phone. 2 people had contacted their GP practice and 1 person reported that they could not find a dentist to see them.

12 respondents required urgent dental treatment between July - December 2020.

Most respondents had been able to access urgent treatment, although 2 respondents reported that their regular NHS dentist could not see them. 3 respondents reported that they were not on the list of a regular dentist and they couldn't find a dentist who would see them. 1 respondent said they called NHS 111, who were unable to refer them to a dentist.



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Comments we received included:

“No dental treatment received. Urgent care at local dentist abysmal. Did not know urgent care process. In agonising pain for 13 weeks”

“Unable to access dentist in person for assessment and treatment of several tooth abscess until initial lockdown over as directed by BDA not to undertake certain procedures. Tooth was finally lost”.

Routine Dental Treatment

We are aware that the availability of routine dental appointments since June 2020 has been impacted by a number of factors including build-up of dental problems that have become urgent during the lockdown period, enabling access for vulnerable patients and restrictions on the number of appointments available in order for dentists to comply with infection control procedures issued in response to the pandemic.

47 respondents reported that between July - December 2020 they had wanted to access routine dental treatment. 11 of these were private patients, 34 were NHS dental patients, and 2 were not with a regular dentist.

10 patients who saw a private dentist had been able to access routine treatments from their regular dentist. 1 private patient reported that their regular dentist could not see them.

11 of the NHS patients reported that they had received routine treatment from their regular dentist. However, 20 reported that their NHS dentist had not been able to see them.

Two respondents who were not with a regular dentist had not been able to find a dentist to see them. One respondent reported that they had avoided any appointments due to the risk of Coronavirus.

“I think it has become impossible to get an appointment, also the routine appointments for my children have been cancelled regularly - no one wants to see you.”

Finding a dentist since March 2020

10 people reported that they had tried to find an NHS dentist since March 2020. Of these 6 reported that there was not one available. 4 people had been able to find an NHS dentist.

Of those unable to find an NHS dentist 1 person had been waiting 0-6 months, 2 had been waiting 6-12 months, 1 had been waiting 12- 24 months and 1 had been waiting over 2 years to get on an NHS dentist list.

Impact of changes to dental services

We asked people what impact changes to dental services have had for respondents since March 2020. Comments have been themed and are reported in order of frequency:

- Missed or cancelled routine dental appointments (27)
- No impact (21)
- Experienced dental problems / pain (8)
- Concern that missed dental appointments may impact on another medical condition (5)
- Difficulties getting a routine dental appointment (5)

- Lack of communication about the availability of routine appointments (5)
- Unable to access NHS dentist (4)

Other comments included: lack of dental hygienist services (3), increased charges for dental hygienist services (2), concern about future dental health due to missing routine appointments (2). We also had a single comment about: delay to ongoing dental treatment, infection control measures (one positive comment and one negative comment), praise for care from NHS dentist, reluctance to visit dentist due to Covid-19.

“I have had my routine appointment cancelled for September, I last visited in early March, no information or update has been provided since my appointment was cancelled 2 months before it was due. My sister is moving back to the area and can't access a dentist at all on the NHS. All their lists are closed”.

“I have ongoing challenges with my teeth and am concerned missing my ongoing regular dental check-ups for well over a year there will be long term negative implications for my dental health.... Dental care is equivalent to GP and A&E / hospital services and should have found a way to continue through the pandemic!”

I no longer receive invites or reminders to get my regular NHS check-ups. Plus, there is no information or updates on my dentist's website, and it is very difficult to get anyone by phone.”

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that most respondents to this Survey who had needed urgent dental care since March 2020 have been able to access this via the telephone in the early part of the pandemic or in person when high street dentists re-opened.

However, we are aware through our Covid-19 Survey, which ran from March - July 2020, and through our signposting service that lack of access to, and information about, urgent dental care was difficult for some people during the period that dentists were closed.

From this Survey it would appear that some respondents are still having difficulty accessing routine dental treatment from their NHS dentist. 20 respondents reported this, which chimes with what we have heard through our signposting function.

6 respondents to this Survey reported being unable to find an NHS dentist and experienced waiting times of 6 months and above to get on an NHS dentist list.

Although we do not have enough data to make any firm recommendations it would seem that accessing routine NHS dental appointments is still an issue for people in Worcestershire.

We hope that this information is useful to you and if you want any further information please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours Sincerely,



Jo Ringshall,
Director, Healthwatch Worcestershire