

## Welsh Government must show it's not aping Westminster on charge hikes

The British Dental Association Wales has warned the Welsh Government's unprecedented increase in charges for NHS dentistry must protect vulnerable patients and put new funds to work securing better access and a more sustainable service.

The professional body believe the hike announced is set to be the largest single increase in charge levels in the 75-year history of the NHS. From 1 April 2024 a band 1 treatment like a check-up will increase from £14.70 to £20.00, a 36.1% increase. A band 2 like a filling will increase from £47.00 to £60.00, a 27.7% increase and a band 3 like dentures will increase from £203 to £260.10, a 28.1% increase.

Urgent care charges will more than double from £14.70 to £30.00. The BDA say this could leave the Welsh Government only paying £6 toward that NHS care with the

patient paying around 85% of the cost of that service.

The BDA has previously been complimentary of the 'restraint' exercised by the Welsh Government. It says the Cardiff Bay administration now risks aping the tactics of the Westminster Government, who for 14 years have used inflation busting hikes to reduce state contributions within a flat budget. A 4% increase in charge levels was announced yesterday.

While some adults are exempt from charges, many on very modest incomes still have to pay fees in full. The BDA anticipate the impact could be profound given the depth of socio-economic and oral health inequalities within Wales, and that reforms to current exemptions from charges should be urgently considered to provide a safety net for low income, high needs, fee paying patients.

Dental charges do not go to dentists and are explicitly designed to reduce demand for services. Their introduction in 1951 – to help offset the costs of the Korean War – prompted the resignation of NHS founder Nye Bevan from the then Labour Government.

Russell Gidney, Chair of the Welsh General Dental Practice Committee, said: 'If this money doesn't end up providing better and more sustainable care than the Welsh Government will be following the Westminster playbook. Forcing patients to pay more, so they can pay less.'

'Charges hikes should never provide cover for cuts. Any increases will inevitably force patients on modest incomes to delay dental care or avoid it entirely, and a proper safety net needs to be in place. Cardiff Bay must not go down a path that will widen already scandalous oral health inequalities.'

## Stormont warned NHS dentistry in its final days

A devastating survey of high street dentists in Northern Ireland has revealed the true extent of the crisis facing the profession.

According to the survey 75% of dentists in NI have reduced their NHS commitment since lockdown – by an average of a quarter, 88% now say they intend to reduce – or further reduce – that commitment in the year ahead and 49% say they are likely to go fully private.

Only 20% of dentists report their practices as taking on new HS registrations. Only 39% of practices say they are operating at full capacity. Almost two thirds (65%) cite

higher needs patients requiring more clinical time as a factor constraining their practice from operating at pre-COVID capacity, reflecting the impact of the ongoing backlog.

A further 97% say costs to provide HS care have increased. Less than 1 in 10 (8%) believe the Department of Health has acted to adequately mitigate these costs. 97% say increased costs are putting HS dentistry at their practices at risk. 94% say expenses are a factor in determining how much HS dentistry they can provide.

Without the Stormont Brake being applied, a ban on dental amalgam is expected from 1 January 2025. Without mitigations being put in place by DoH, 92% say it will reduce the amount of HS activity at their practice. 92% say this will increase costs for HS activity at their practice. Nine in ten say this will impact on higher needs patients seen at their practice, while 88% say this will lead their practice to reduce or end its HS commitment.

Interesting, 86% say authorities should move at

pace to roll out similar changes to the current low margin/high volume contractual framework that were rolled out in Scotland which aimed to better reflect the costs of care.

The British Dental Association has appealed to the restored Government to throw the service a lifeline, protect it from the hammer blow of the ban on amalgam fillings, and rapidly roll out changes the payment model followed by Scotland.

The professional body stresses that no health professional should be expected to deliver NHS care at a loss, and that urgent action is needed to prevent the wholesale collapse of services across NI.

Ciara Gallagher, Chair of the British Dental Association's Northern Ireland Dental Practice Committee, said: 'NHS dentistry in Northern Ireland is on its knees, and the amalgam ban could be the final blow. Dentists have told us they are working in what feels like the final days of this service. Delivering Health Service care at a loss and developing private work simply to break even.'

'A restored Stormont has the power to ensure NHS dentistry can once again stand on its own two feet. If it doesn't, this service will die.'



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