



healthwatch
Barnet

Dentistry in Barnet

A dental investigation in Barnet 2014/15





Introduction

Healthwatch Barnet was contacted by local residents who had experienced difficulty with dental services in the Barnet Area. These individuals had concerns in the following three areas:

- 1) Difficulty in being able to find a dentist offering NHS services;
- 2) Not being advised of the potential full cost of dental services at the start of treatment;
- 3) Feeling unconvinced that dental treatments recommended by their dentist were necessary.

To investigate these situations further, we focussed on the first two areas, and undertook Mystery Shopping of Barnet Dental Surgeries. We decided to ask 40% of surgeries a set of standard questions to explore:

- 1) Availability of NHS dentists in the Borough;
- 2) The approach taken by dental surgery staff to ensure patients were made aware of the potential costs of their treatment.

We considered that we had to look into the first two areas before we could consider the third. Consequently we advised those patients who contacted us that they could arrange to have a second opinion about treatment, by visiting another dentist and seeking their opinion. Many patients did not understand that if they were not 'registered' with a dentist they were free to go elsewhere for any treatment should they wish to do so.

However, by seeking a second opinion in this way these patients were likely to incur the cost of a second check-up. Having discussed this issue with individuals affected, we concluded that the lack of access to dental records and medical and other lifelong history was a significant barrier in building up trust between dentists and their patients and ensuring the correct treatment was offered. Patients distinctly thought that the dentist stood to financially gain from recommending treatment, and they did not therefore always trust the dentist's recommendation.



Approach and Methodology

We recruited a team of six Healthwatch Barnet volunteers who helped to design a short questionnaire exploring the issues relevant to this investigation. The questionnaire can be seen in appendix 1.

The list of dental practices registered in Barnet with the CQC was extracted from the CQC website and those practices that dealt with only specialist services were removed from the list (Care Quality Commission, 2015). The rest of the practices were geographically plotted on a map of the Borough and a range of practices from all geographic areas of Barnet were randomly selected to be contacted.

We trained the volunteers in the principles of mystery shopping and provided them with the details of a number of dental practices across the Borough.

Each of the volunteers undertook a number of phone calls asking the standard agreed questions, and they each recorded the responses using Survey Monkey. This was then analysed.

A copy of the final report was sent to the Local Dental Committee who made some helpful comments and supported our conclusions and recommendations. A copy was also sent to NHS England but no response has been received from them to date.

Background Research

This was the first time the Healthwatch Barnet team had worked in the field of dentistry - it was very exciting!

We spoke to a number of patients and professionals to make sure we understood the process and any key issues. In addition, we spoke to a 'Friend of Healthwatch Barnet' who is a dentist and who has worked in a number of different areas of the country. He explained how the dental practices operate and the contracts that are in place with NHS England and provided expert knowledge. We also explored NHS Choices in depth and found the information section of the website to be very clear and informative about how charges work and what is covered (National Health Service, 2015).

We met with the Barnet Local Dental Committee who were very helpful in explaining the local dental services and contractual processes.

We also reviewed NHS England's GP Patient Survey, which was conducted from July to September 2014 (National Health Service England, 2015). 3,626 adults across Barnet were asked about their views on NHS dentistry as part of NHS England's national dentist survey. The Barnet specific data revealed:



- 1) In response to, '*Were you successful in getting an NHS dental appointment?*', 89% of people who tried to get an NHS dental appointment were successful in Barnet in the last two years
- 2) In response to '*Last time you tried to get an NHS dental appointment, was it with a dental practice you had been to before for NHS dental care?*', national results show that those respondents who had not been to the practice before were 20% less successful (76% compared to 96%) than who had made an appointment at a practice which they had previously visited in the last two years.
- 3) In response to the '*Overall, how would you describe your experience of NHS dental services?*', 82% of people had a very good/fairly good experience of NHS dental services in Barnet, 7% had a fairly poor/very poor experience and 11% judged it has neither good nor poor.
- 4) The reasons most often given for people not trying to obtain a NHS dental appointment were: prefer to go to a private dentist (25%); haven't needed a visit (21%); didn't think could get an NHS appointment (20%).

Concurrently HWB were contacted by Which? (the consumer champion organisation, which undertakes regular research and reviews into services and products) who were undertaking a national survey of the public to ascertain their understanding of dental costs and charges. We contributed to the preparations for this, by discussing the local dental issues that had been raised with us and promoted the survey with Barnet residents.

Which? surveyed 1,001 dental patients about their experiences and found the following:

- 1) 22% of the people surveyed who had dental treatment didn't feel completely clear about what it would cost before starting.
- 2) 43% of people surveyed felt well informed about NHS and private treatments, and how they differ.
- 3) 15% did not have the benefits and drawbacks of different options explained.
- 4) 52% of people surveyed who should have got a treatment plan (for complex treatment such as fillings or crowns) were given one, although 87% think it's important.
- 5) 43% of people surveyed saw a price list in the reception or waiting area, although 88% think this is important.

Furthermore, Which? sent five undercover researchers to dentist practices nationally at 25 mixed (NHS/private) practices. They asked a panel of experts - including two experienced dentists/practice owners and an expert in patient-focused dental research - to assess the visits. They looked at everything from the communication of NHS and private options, to clarity of pricing. The Which? undercover investigation has found that people could be paying more than they need to for treatment because some dentists aren't explaining dental prices upfront, or being clear about what NHS treatment patients



are entitled to. The investigation (Dentists unclear about costs and treatment options, finds Which?) recommends that all dentists should:

- 1) Comply with existing rules and make information on prices clearly available:
- 2) Explain the dental treatment options properly;
- 3) Make sure patients know whether or not their treatment is available on the NHS (Which? 2015).

Profile of Barnet Dentists

According to the CQC website there are 122 dentists registered within the Borough of Barnet, though a number of these are providing specialist services only. The general dental practices are geographically spread throughout the Borough with significant groupings of services following the main population density of the area (Care Quality Commission, 2015).

Since the new dental contracts were introduced in 2006 there has apparently been no change in the number of UDAs available in the Borough of Barnet. (A UDA is a Unit of Dental Activity which represents a single unit of dental work such as a check-up.) Each dental practice which was in existence in 2006 was allocated a level of UDAs which was determined by their work level in 2005, and these amounts have not altered in the last 10 years. The population of the Borough has been estimated to have grown from 329,100 in 2005 to 364,000 in 2012, (Public Health England, 2014; The Guardian, 2015) so the level of funding per head of population has therefore fallen.

The Local Dental Committee (LDC) is very aware of this situation, and knows that many of their members would very much like to be able to offer much higher levels of NHS treatments, but due to the very tight contracts they are unable to do so. If dentists undertake NHS work above the level they are allocated to do, they are not reimbursed for this work and are therefore out of pocket. They consider themselves powerless to influence the decision-makers in this area, despite the fact that the need for additional resources for NHS dentistry appears to be generally acknowledged.

As part of the Secretary of State for Health's 2014/15 determination for dental contracts and agreements the Department of Health has decided to:

- 1) Uplift (increase in funds) to all General Dentistry Services contracts and Personal Dentistry Services by 1.6%. The LDC informed us that the uplift does not mean an increase in UDAs and would be swallowed up by increased practice expenses.
- 2) Develop strategic aims for NHS dentistry:



- a. To improve the oral health of the population, especially children, hard to reach and vulnerable groups, and to reduce inequalities of outcomes;
 - b. To move to a more preventative approach based on the needs of the individual patient and the population.
 - c. Increased integration of care across primary, community and hospital settings.
 - d. Ensuring good and equitable access to NHS dentistry.
- 3) Develop an efficacy package that can deliver savings across, national and local, in line with the rest of the NHS (National Health Service England, 2015).

Findings

We spoke to 50 dental practices in the Borough of Barnet as mystery shoppers and asked them all the same questions, posing as someone who was looking for a new dentist in their local area, and wanting to find out what services were available. The calls all took place during December 2014 and January 2015.

Findings: New Patients:

We found that:

- 1) 53% of the practices we spoke to were not, at that point, accepting new NHS adult patients;
- 2) 47% were not accepting new children as patients.

A small number of surgeries (6) told us they would be able to take NHS again when the new financial year started and to contact them again in February/March when they would start making NHS appointments again. We understand that this is because they have used up the full allocation of Units of Dental Activity. Some practices told us they would offer NHS charges to patients who did not require significant dental work.

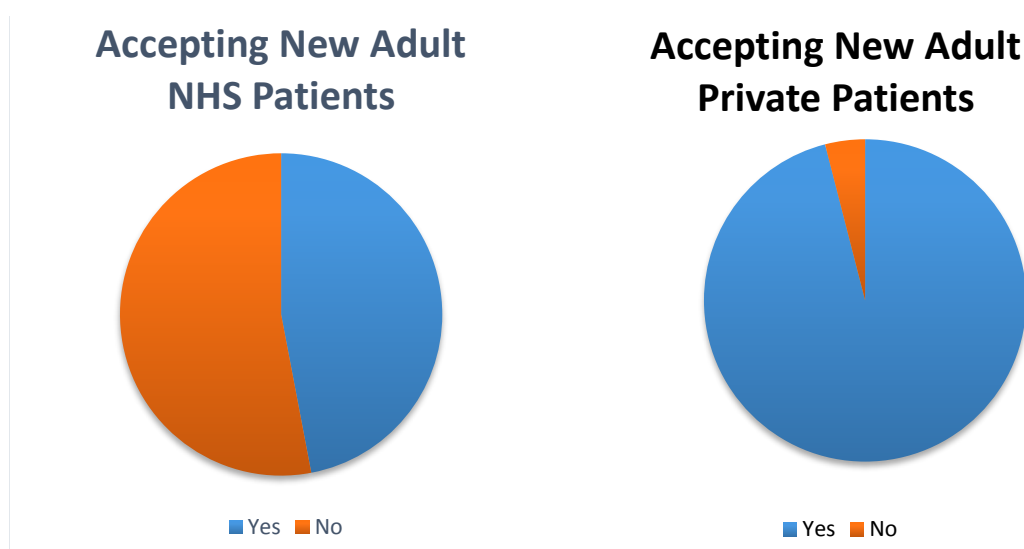
96% of practices were taking on new private adult patients (and 92% for children). This would lead us to believe that there is not an issue with capacity for dentists.

This information concurs with the feedback that Healthwatch Barnet has received from the local residents that it is very difficult to access NHS dentistry services in the Borough, though they can easily be offered private treatment which is often out of financial reach



of patients. As is the case nationally, Barnet residents are not restricted to using dental services within the Borough itself.

Our findings do not support the results from NHS England's GP Patient Survey (July to September 2014) in Barnet. The NHS England results indicate that very high percentage of patients are successful in getting an NHS appointment in Barnet within the last two years. We found that more than half of practices we spoke to did not accept new NHS patients. The inconsistency could be explained by the time of the year that the NHS survey was undertaken or the phrasing of their question. Our findings in Barnet are also replicated by findings of Which?'s investigations.



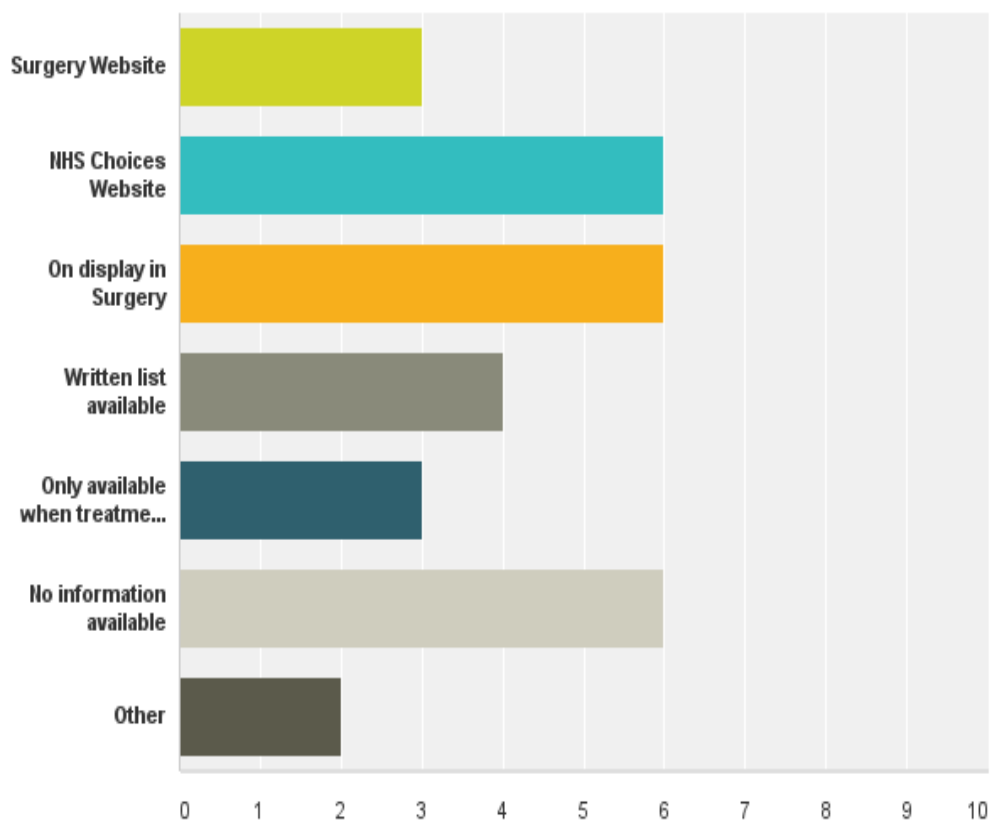
Findings: Transparency of Cost

We wished to investigate if information is provided to patients clearly about how much their treatment will cost. The General Dental Council advises that 'before a dental professional carries out any work, they should check your mouth and then give you a treatment plan and an estimate of how much any work will cost' (Smile - Your dental team have check-ups too GDC 2014).

NHS England (via NHS Choices) also advise that all NHS patients should be given a treatment plan and estimate of how much any work will cost. Therefore, we asked the practices who offered NHS services, if NHS patients were given information about the cost of their treatment, and 69% told us that an explanation of NHS charges was provided. The chart below shows where practices said the information was available.



Q5 How can information about the cost of NHS treatment be accessed?



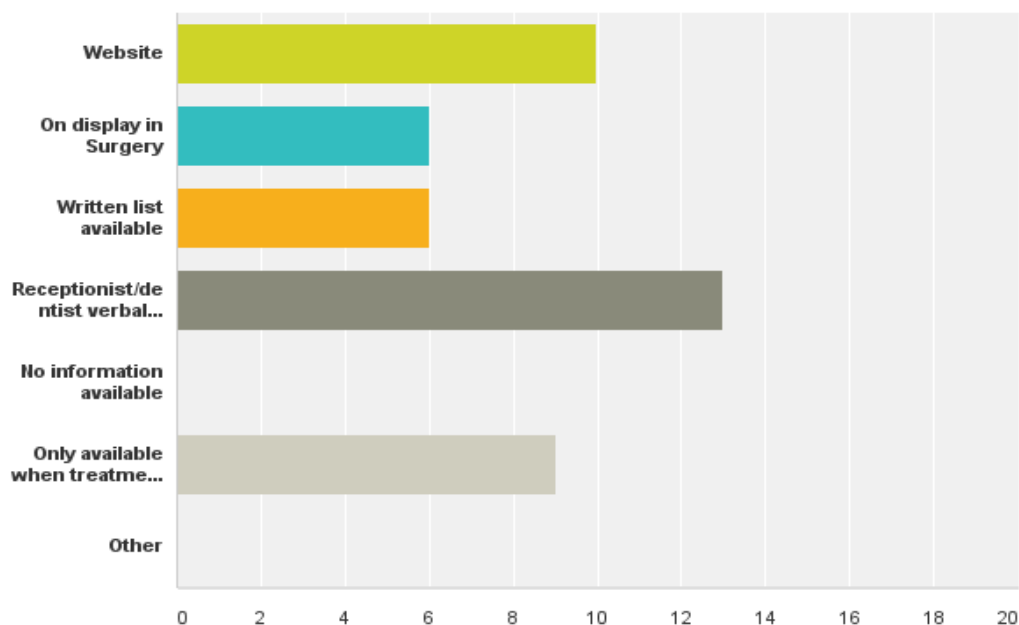
Only 6 practices said the information relating to cost was on display. Of the remainder:

- 5 said a written list was available
- 9 would refer to either the practice website or the NHS Choices website
- 3 said they would explain the costs if treatment was needed.



We also asked practices offering private charges for dentistry, if private patients were able to access information about the cost of treatments. The graph below summarises the responses.

Q6 Where private dentistry is offered, where is information available about the cost of treatment?



Only 6 of the 44 practices who offer private treatment had a list on display in the surgery. Of those remaining:

- 10 said it was available on the surgery website, (we checked and found this was the case for 9)
- 6 that a written list was available on request
- 22 said that either the dentist would discuss it when treatment was needed or the information was explained verbally.



Findings:

Treatment Plans

We asked if treatment plans were available to all patients as a matter of routine before any treatment was offered - 85% of practices told us they were, though 15% (7 practices) said they were not.

We had received anecdotal evidence from patients that they felt under pressure to agree to treatment when it was recommended even though it would them financial hardship.

Patients felt vulnerable at the time of attending the appointment and did not feel comfortable explaining their financial considerations, and felt under pressure to continue with the treatment recommended. Some also felt that this was discussed in an area that was not private enough. We believe it would be beneficial to patients if they could have some time to reflect on their options before agreeing to continue with their treatment including being able to research further options that may be available to them. Some individuals told us that once they had made the appointment they felt unable to retract from the agreement, and others felt they would have been fined for changing the arrangement. Whilst we did not at this point research this point further we accept that this situation could commonly occur and could easily be rectified.

Recommendations

Consideration should be given by NHS England to increase the number of UDAs that are available in Barnet.

We have clear evidence that NHS dentistry is not available in Barnet due to the lack of funding. This is particularly an issue in the last 4/5 months of the financial year, when practices have used their full allocation of UDAs.

- 1) **Clear information about NHS dentistry costs should be readily available to all patients when they attend a dental appointment.** The Department of Health leaflet 'NHS dental services in England' explains the full situation in clear language and should be readily available. NHS Choices also provides very straightforward advice. These sources should be easily available and patients should be referred to them, or other-up-to-date advice and information either before or at the start of their visit to the dentist. It is suggested that when a patient books an appointment they should be given some information or referred to a web resource at that point to ensure they understand the situation.
- 2) **Details of private dental costs should be available to all private patients at the time they attend an appointment.** We recommend that all practices make their prices clearly available to all patients, on their website, on display in the practice or in leaflets available to patients. This information should be available to patients before they attend appointments so that they are aware of potential costs and can make informed decisions.
- 3) **All patients should receive a clear written treatment plan, including costs, before any treatment is started.**

Practices should ensure that patients have a clear period of time to consider their treatment plan, especially if it involves significant financial outlay, to ensure they



are comfortable with going ahead with the treatment. They should also ensure the patient understands any disadvantages of delaying the treatment. We recommend that ideally, there should be a private area where patients can ask questions and explain their situation to the receptionist or dentist, away from other patients/the main waiting area. However, we do not know how many practices have a private area, as this was not a specific question on our survey.

Conclusions

We found that there is clearly a shortfall in the amount of NHS dentistry being funded in Barnet, resulting in patchy availability both geographically and also according to the time of year

However our recommendations would ensure that patients are more aware of the cost of treatment, and thus be able to make measured decisions about what treatment they wish to undertake. In particular, there is a definite need for dentists offering private treatment to be more transparent about their costs.

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Appendix 1

Dentistry Questionnaire

1. General Information

Your Name:

Date of contact:

Name and address of Dental Surgery:

2. Are you currently accepting new NHS patients?

Adults Adults Yes

Adults No

Children Children Yes

Children No

Any Comments

3. Are you accepting new Private Patients?

Adults Adults Yes

Adults No

Children Children Yes

Children No

Any Comments



4. If you are accepting new NHS patients, is there a list of charges for different treatments available?

Yes

No

5. How can this information be accessed?

Surgery Website

NHS Choices Website

On display in Surgery

Written list available

Only available when treatment needed

No information available

Other (please explain)

Any Comments

6. If you are accepting new private patients is there a list of charges for different treatments under private care?

Website

On display in Surgery

Written list available

Receptionist/dentist verbally explains

No information available

Only available when treatment needed

Other (please explain)

Any comments

7. Are written Treatment Plans automatically produced for all treatment recommended?

Are these issued before treatment starts in all cases?

Yes

No

Other (please specify)

8. Please add any other general information you gathered that may be interest.



Contact us:

Healthwatch Barnet

Barnet House
1255 High Road
London N20 0EJ

www.healthwatchbarnet.co.uk