

Workforce

Shaun Sellars continues his series on ethical dilemmas in dentistry which appears in every second issue of the *BDJ*.



Much has been made of the recent drop in numbers of dental nurses on the General Dental Council (GDC) register and a possible recruitment crisis for nurses.^{1,2} While it's clear that around 3,800 nurses failed to re-register with the GDC when their Annual Retention Fee was due, a closer look at the numbers shows a more complex story. Comparing the figures to last year showed a slight increase in the number of nurses yearly.^{3,4} Is this recruitment crisis real, and if so, why?

The variation in the yearly figures seems to be related to more experienced nurses leaving the profession and new recruits joining as you'd expect. Still, asking around, there appears to be difficulty in attracting new people to the job. Having worked in a rural location for most of my practising life, this is nothing new, but every practice owner I've talked to has said the same – nurses are a rare commodity.

Then again, who would choose to be a dental nurse right now? According to the British Association of Dental Nurses, most dental nurses earn less than £20,000.⁵ These are professional, qualified, regulated individuals carrying out a skilled job, and we can't do our jobs without them. The current COVID-19 PPE requirements are, in my practice setting at least, taking their toll on the nurses more than the dentists.

Again, the reality isn't as simple as the raw numbers would suggest. There's a long-term decline in earnings in the dental industry, and it's not just a COVID-related problem. Recent NHS figures estimate that dental income is stagnating at best and may be down by around 40% in real terms over the last decade or so.⁶ Even given this, associates are on average earning about three times what their nurse does, and practice owners can expect to earn over five times what their nurse brings home. And yes, we're the ones with the degree and doing the treatment, but this discrepancy in pay belies the importance of the dental nurse as part of the team.

Dental nurse forums report that nurses feel overworked, undervalued and underpaid. While many dentists may feel that way, we're generally earning much more than the average income and considerably more than those who work with us. We are asking nurses to do more work than previously, under more challenging conditions, when many could earn a similar (or better) wage at their local supermarket.

The answer isn't just to pay nurses more. Nurses, and other DCPs, are vital to practising dentistry. It's time that we respected them for that. We need to look at the workforce holistically, much as we're expected to do with patients. A valued staff member is a happy staff member. More than this, we need, as a community, to ensure that dental nurses and other dental team members

have a voice at all levels of dentistry, including at a regulatory level. Given that nurses constitute the largest sector of the dental register, it's unacceptable that there is no dental nurse (or any DCP) on the GDC council. No regulation without representation.

References

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2. Tapper C. GDC registration report reveals significant drop in dental nurse numbers. Dental technician numbers decimated since 2019. 2021. Available at <https://www.gdpuk.com/news/latest-news/4027%20gdc-registration-report-reveals-significant-drop-in-dental-nurse-numbers> (accessed September 2021).
3. General Dental Council. Registration report – August 2020. 2020. Available at <https://www.gdc-uk.org/docs/default-source/registration-reports/registration-report-august-2020704f1baa9e7a4a45b9be7eb9f1bf02c2.pdf> (accessed September 2021).
4. General Dental Council. Registration report – August 2021. 2021. Available at <https://www.gdc-uk.org/docs/default-source/registration-reports/registration-report---august-2021667c9505-ef25-42f2-bd89-591de0081632.pdf> (accessed September 2021).
5. British Association of Dental Nurses. BADN 2020 Salary Survey Report. 2021. Available at <https://www.badn.org.uk/News/BADN-2020-Salary-Survey-Report.aspx> (accessed September 2021).
6. British Dental Association. 40% drop in dentists' incomes over a decade. 2021. Available at <https://www.bda.org/news-centre/latest-news-articles/Pages/40-per-cent-drop-in-dentists-incomes-over-a-decade.aspx> (accessed September 2021).

New Writers' Workshop returns

After a gap caused by the pandemic, the New Writers' Workshop is returning. This year it will be held at the British Dental Association, 64 Wimpole Street, London W1G 8YS on Tuesday, 2 November 2021, starting at 11.00 am.

The programme for the day will cover the following aspects: 'Getting your submission right: hints and tips', 'The peer review process and the importance of reviewers', 'Group work reviewing a paper',

'Why editors reject papers', 'Open access, funding and Plan S' and 'Publication ethics'.

The fee for the workshop is £40 for members of the British Dental Editors and Writers Forum (BDEWF), £65 for non-BDEWF members and £20 for full-time under and postgraduate students. The fee includes lunch, tea and coffee and delegates will be eligible for five hours of CPD. Those wishing to register for the day should contact stephen.hancocks@bda.org.

