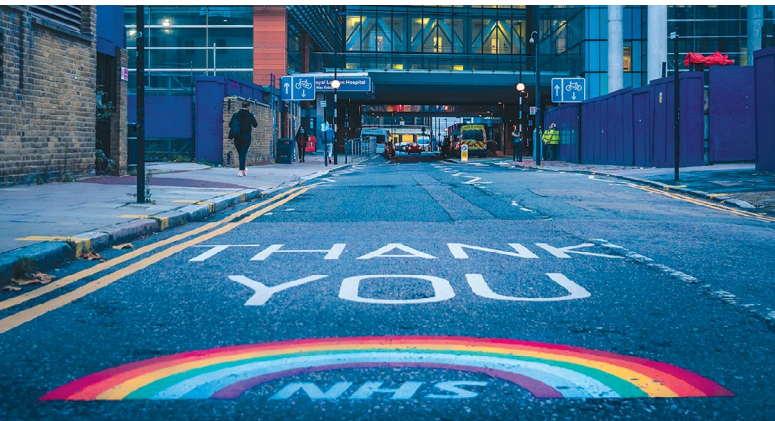


Combatting COVID-19: an insight into the trials, tribulations and triumphs of the frontline dental team

COVID-19 – the impact on wellbeing of the dental team in a secondary care urgent dental hub. *Br Dent J* 2021; <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41415-021-3317-0>



It feels like nothing has been left untouched by the pandemic. Billions of people have had their lives drastically changed, potentially forever. The charity Mind have estimated that 22% of people with no previous history of mental health issues have developed poor mental health over the course of the pandemic.¹ It can be easy to forget, in the display of such heroism, that the impact on the individuals forming a dental team is no different.

Dental teams were faced with high levels of stress and burnout before the pandemic even began, facing the pressures of litigation and regulation. Following the cessation of all routine and non-urgent dental care in March 2020, 700 new urgent dental care (UDC) centres were established in England. Many other team members were redeployed loosely within their scope of practice. Across all roles, the personal, professional and financial pressures have only increased. Staff wellbeing is paramount to providing optimal patient care, yet the dental team can sometimes be excluded from the same support services readily available to other medical professionals.

Using 14 voluntary focus groups, the authors of this paper aim to illustrate the effects of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of the dental team, reflecting on the experiences shared by the UDC team in the Royal National ENT and Eastman Dental Hospitals (as of July 2020). The research

builds on the limited evidence available on the stress levels of the dental team, with much of the literature excluding members of the wider team. Following prompted discussion within the focus groups, key themes were identified using software analysis of the anonymous, verbatim transcript.

The themes highlight the bravery, adaptability and selflessness of the dental team, and the resilience generated through the good communication, organisation and integration of different specialities. However, this should not mask the struggles faced by the individual. The team have been anxious about putting their families' safety at risk. Are they wearing PPE correctly? Is it safe to use public transport? Are restrictions being lifted too quickly? They have been stepping into the unknown while others have been urged to stay at home, juggling both ever-changing personal and working lives.

Although the results of this study aren't necessarily generalisable to the entire dental workforce, it gives us all an opportunity to reflect on the challenges faced and possible strategies available to help team members.² Furthermore, it helps us shine a light on the often undocumented struggles of the wider team. While Trust wellbeing services and wider-reaching online resources are being established,^{3,4,5} the authors argue more can be done to make support readily available for all members of the dental workforce.

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Why did you decide to undertake this study?

This study was carried out at a time when there were huge uncertainties within the dental workforce. We wanted to highlight the anxieties and stresses our team experienced but also to demonstrate the great adaptability of a dental hospital workforce, including nursing staff and clinicians. It was vital that we were able to demonstrate the true impact of the pandemic on mental wellbeing in the dental community.

Did any of the results surprise you?

The results were relatively predictable; however, it was warming to see how much teamwork was highlighted throughout all the focus group discussions, particularly at a time when the healthcare sector was battling a global pandemic. The sheer positivity drawn from these focus groups was extremely admirable and the adaptability to join our medical colleagues was highlighted throughout.

What do you think the next steps should be considering your findings?

The next focus following this study would be a post-pandemic analysis as the hospital returns to near normality, and to assess the dental hospital workforce on their anxieties and stresses. It would also be beneficial to measure these more objectively through anxiety scales pre- and post-pandemic to assess any evidence of any long-lasting mental wellbeing effects or post-traumatic stress disorders. ■