



## Dental care – access improves as cost becomes an issue

**“Want to see the NHS dentist? Join the mile long queue”  
“Reach for the pliers! 3 million do their own dentistry because they can’t get an NHS appointment”**

It’s been much publicised for many years now about the problems people in the UK face trying to access NHS dentistry – with dramatic headlines becoming all too common. But latest Government statistics show that progress is being made here.

For the fifth consecutive quarter, the number of patients seen by an NHS dentist in England exceeded the March 2006 baseline - when the current dental contract was introduced. A total of 28.9 million patients were seen in the 24-month period ending December 2010, an increase of 2.7%.

In Scotland, the number of people registered with an NHS dentist has risen to a new high. Scottish Government figures revealed increases to 69% of adults and 83% of children by December last year. But only 58% of the population went to their dentist for treatment over the two years ending September 2010.

While progress is being made to improve access, a new issue is emerging during the current economic climate – affordability. The latest research shows a worrying trend of people cancelling and deferring treatment as a result of cost – a view expressed by dentists and patients alike.

A recent survey by the British Dental Association found that 59% of dentists had patients cancel appointments, while 68% reported decisions to defer treatment. These trends have led to a third of practitioners seeing an increased demand for emergency treatment during the past 12 months.

The 2009 Adult Dental Survey published recently found that 26% of adults had let cost affect the type of dental treatment they had chosen to have. A further 19% have delayed treatment for the same reason.

The Government is currently piloting a new dental contract for England based on registration, capitation and quality. But it is likely that charges will remain for NHS dentistry. This means the costs associated with visiting the dentist could threaten the effectiveness of any new proposals implemented in the coming months.

The move towards emergency rather than preventative treatment can have a negative impact on employers as it is more likely to result in absences from work. An affordable dental plan can easily overcome this problem and will prove popular amongst employees who may be struggling to afford dental treatment.