The future of private dentistry

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Over the course of my series of three articles for BDJ in Practice, I have written about the issues confronting dental practices as we come out of the pandemic – with some themes that run from well before it started, I have provided my views as to how we consider those issues based on my personal professional experience and after hearing feedback from our 6,700 Denplan member dentists.

The previous two articles in this trilogy have focused on NHS dentistry and mixed dental practices. However, with the third article in this series I wish to devote my column inches to private sector dentistry. The majority of our Denplan member dentists have good reason to take this view of the government’s poor knowledge about private dentistry based upon the experience of several decades of public health policy.

My concern is that private dentistry can often be viewed as purely cosmetic dentistry. From my own experience in practice, and for the many all private practices I know, this is predominantly not the case. Of course, cosmetic dentistry is central to some private practices. Yet for many, their model is based around ongoing regular preventive oral care for families.

Far too often dentistry is an afterthought for policy makers and the vital role it plays in public health is consistently overlooked. There is even less understanding of the role private dentistry plays in this. In addition, the Department for Health & Social Care’s recent white paper on reforming the healthcare system, Integration and innovation,7 made little to no reference to dentistry – let alone private dentistry – and its role in the wider health and wellbeing of patients. Indeed, aside from proposals on water fluoridation, dentists are left excluded from the proposed network of ICSs (Integrated Care Systems) in much the same way dentistry has been excluded from previous reform initiatives – much to the detriment of public health.

Despite the lack of acknowledgement from Whitehall, private dental practices nevertheless play a crucial role in maintaining the oral and general health of the nation and should be properly supported to do so. Alongside NHS dentists, they promote oral health and disease prevention, support the diagnosis of certain conditions, and provide patients with preventive lifestyle advice. Indeed, private dentistry plays an integral role in the early detection of many chronic and life-threatening diseases including the most concerning of which is mouth cancer. Last year, 8,722 people in the UK were diagnosed with mouth cancer – almost one person every hour. The number of cases each year continues to grow at an astonishing rate – there has been an estimated 97% increase in the incidence of mouth cancer over the last 20 years.8 With mouth cancer now the 14th most common cancer in the UK and 9th most common amongst men, never has the early preventive role of dentists been more important and the screening carried out in both NHS and private examinations. However, as recently demonstrated by comments from government ministers in Parliament, there remains a poor understanding of the vital role dentistry plays in the early diagnosis and referrals of mouth cancers.9

A Cochrane Oral Health review highlighted that visual inspection of the mouth by a front-line health professional is the most effective method of diagnosing such cancers, and successfully detects between 59% and 99% of cases, which is superior to other techniques.9 Across NHS, mixed and private practice the importance of early detection of signs of mouth cancer require a collective...
by Denplan in February of this year, it was
During an expert roundtable event convened
the aforementioned NHS Long Term Plan.
on preventive healthcare building upon
– from telemedicine to wearable health
Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), the wider
integrated health system based around
restructuring healthcare envisions a more
models – private dentistry (and the dental
adoption and greater usage of digital health
for private dentistry. Indeed, even in the field of
the Department of Health & Social Care's
healthcare as early as they should.
who maybe would not attend other areas of
is especially important with those groups
and embrace. We are in a unique position that
some practices have already started to explore
view is that there is an opportunity to play an
nation's health. All three also contribute to the
and excessive alcohol consumption are three
far more integral to healthcare in the future
isn't confined solely to mouth inspections
practices or areas of work, and as a collective.
future is in someone else's hands, we need
to determine it ourselves, in our individual
practices or areas of work, and as a collective.
Then there is the small task of taking the
public and policy makers with us!

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Author bio
After qualifying as a dentist from Leeds University in 1992 and doing a year as a House Officer, Catherine worked as a Senior House Officer in Newcastle before settling into general dental practice. Catherine joined Denplan part-time in 2010 and was promoted to her current position in 2019. She has 19 years’ experience as a joint partner in a private dental practice in Berkshire, and completed a Masters in Medical Ethics and Law from King's College London in 2013. She is also a certified member of the Institute of Risk Management and completed a Level 7 Certificate in Leadership Mentoring and Coaching in 2016.

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