

2019
DENTISTRY
CONFIDENCE
MONITOR
SURVEY

RESULTS
REPORT

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THE DENTISTRY CONFIDENCE MONITOR SURVEY

RESULTS REPORT 2019

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The Dentistry Confidence Monitor survey is carried out by Practice Plan Ltd.
You can learn more about the survey and Practice Plan at:
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Note: The views expressed by the dental professionals throughout this report are the personal views of those individuals only and do not represent the views of Practice Plan.

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Confidence in the future of NHS dentistry and in the approach of the GDC is in short supply and the scale of the challenge to rebuild trust needs careful consideration.

WELCOME TO THE DENTISTRY CONFIDENCE MONITOR SURVEY

The 2019 **Dentistry Confidence Monitor** survey is the seventh survey from Practice Plan since 2014. The survey has evolved to reflect the changes within the profession and this year it widened its scope to include topics such as the GDC, mental health issues and the English NHS contract reform.

The annual surveys have provided a wealth of useful information and discussion points that have led to it being cited in numerous reports, articles and presentations, thereby significantly helping to grow awareness of some of the key issues affecting the UK's dental profession.

We are enormously grateful to those who have taken the time to complete the survey and ensure that the number of respondents gives a significance to the results that mean they cannot, and should not, be ignored.

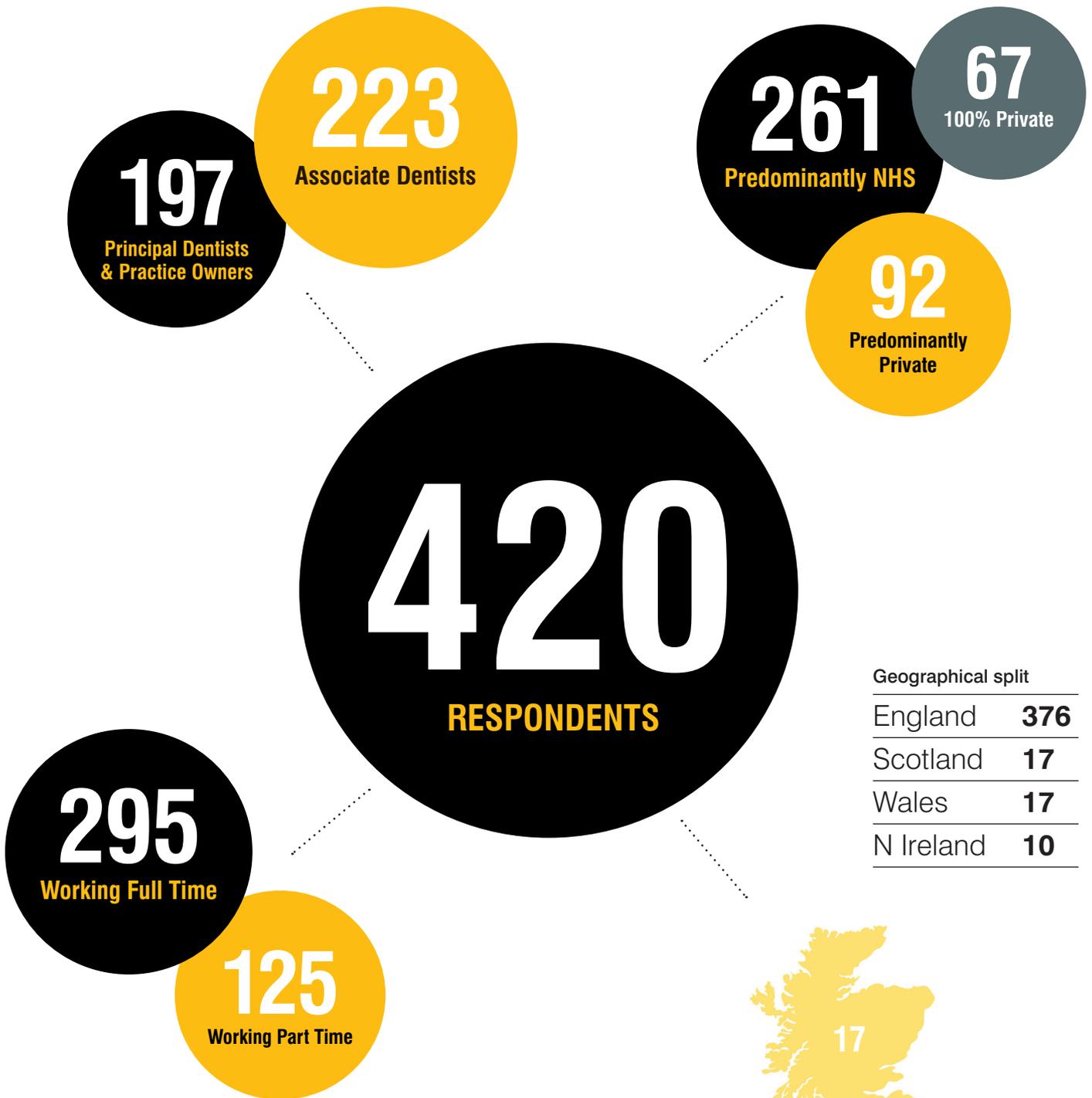
This year's survey is no exception and has built upon the foundations laid in previous years to explore a wider range of subjects including knowledge of the prototype contracts being tested in England, attitudes to the GDC and other considerations such as recruitment of associate dentists and the mental health of the profession.

What seems overwhelmingly clear is that the battle to strike the right balance between the activity demands of the NHS and the professional demands of the regulator is taking its toll and the mental health of the profession is suffering as a result. Confidence in the future of NHS dentistry and in the approach of the GDC is in short supply and the scale of the challenge to rebuild trust needs careful consideration.

It should not be a surprise then that the dental recruitment and retention crisis rightly highlighted by the BDA in recent years looks set to worsen. Too many experienced dentists are looking to retire earlier than planned and a growing number of younger dentists are looking to change profession altogether.

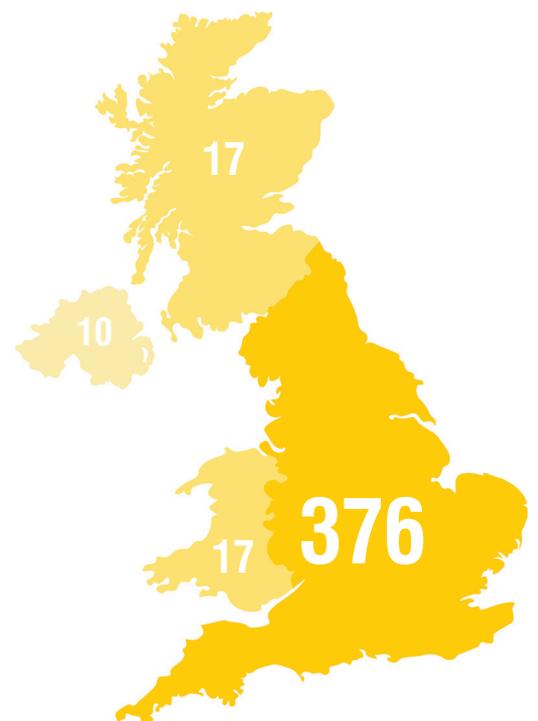
The 2019 Dentistry Confidence Monitor survey results point to the need for urgent action to be taken and this warning should not be dismissed lightly by those in positions of authority and influence.

Nigel Jones is the Sales and Marketing Director at Practice Plan and has been working in the dental sector for almost 30 years. He has a special interest in the development and future of NHS dentistry in the UK.



Geographical split

England	376
Scotland	17
Wales	17
N Ireland	10



The survey was open for 12 weeks between April and June 2019. It was promoted on social media and across the dental press and 420 respondents took part giving their opinions anonymously.

Although largely made up of multiple-choice questions, the survey did provide the option for the respondents to add comments anonymously at the end of each section. A representative sample of these comments has been featured throughout the report.

While the survey was open, the official information from NHS England was that the reformed NHS contract would begin its rollout in April 2020. Theresa May was still Prime Minister and Brexit - the deal or no deal debate - was also at the forefront of people's minds.

IS UK DENTISTRY IN A STATE OF CRISIS?

The seventh Dentistry Confidence Monitor survey paints a stark picture of dentistry in the UK in 2019. NHS dentists are stressed and demoralised with low expectations of any positive upturn with the arrival of the reformed NHS contract for England. Across the board both NHS and private dentists are fearful of the risk of complaints and litigation and have little or no confidence in the GDC to fight their corner. More than half of all dentists said their mental health is being negatively affected by their role and yet they either don't know who to turn to for help, or would rather say nothing for fear of stigma. **Nigel Jones** takes a look at the headlines emerging from the survey results.

89%

...of predominantly NHS and 98% of predominantly private dentists say they are unhappy or very unhappy with the current NHS contract.

This may be driven in part by extremely high levels of unhappiness with the perceived ability to provide, through the current contract, patient care to the level they want and to have enough time to manage patient expectations.

In addition, only 4% of all dentists with NHS involvement believe the reformed contract will work well for the profession.

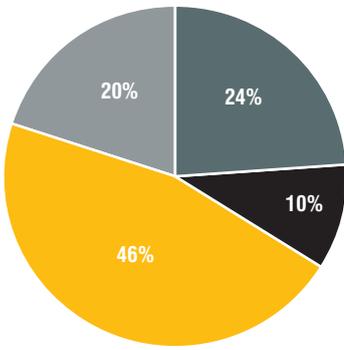
The survey results show that dentists feel ill-informed about the prototype contracts and sceptical of any positive impact on dentists and patients. However, **72%** said they believed that the reformed contract would work well for the Government, exposing a deep mistrust and giving a sense of a profession that feels caught between a rock and a hard place.

84% of predominantly NHS respondents and 51% of all private dentists said that their current role is having a negative effect on their mental health.

There is deep dissatisfaction with the present NHS contract in England, and an understanding that change is needed, however this is accompanied by a huge lack of confidence in the future contractual arrangements. When considered along with the fear of complaints coupled with the belief that the GDC won't handle them correctly, it's hardly surprising that the mental health of the profession is being affected.

72% of all respondents said that they are not confident about which organisation to turn to for support if they were worried about their mental health.

The statistics, and comments, around mental health are particularly dismaying as it seems stress and anxiety continue to be a common symptom of a career in dentistry. The spotlight that has started shining on mental health issues among dentists is becoming brighter, and while that's to be welcomed, it's clear that more needs to be done. Urgent action needs to be taken and this warning should not be dismissed lightly by those in positions of authority and influence.



77% of NHS dentists don't see themselves working in the NHS in five years' time. They were then asked what they *did* see themselves doing...

Retiring earlier than planned	24%
Taking planned retirement	10%
Moving to private dentistry	46%
Changing career	20%

77% of predominantly NHS dentists say they don't see themselves working in the NHS in five years' time.

Almost a quarter of those respondents intend to take retirement earlier than originally planned whilst a fifth are seeking to change profession altogether.

Almost half of those planning to stay in dentistry expect to have moved to predominantly private care within the next five years.

This paints a saddening picture of a large number of dentists who increasingly feel they simply can't see a future for themselves within dentistry. This, combined with large numbers of younger dentists choosing to pursue multiple careers or practise part time, raises questions about the future.

Whilst not a complete panacea for NHS woes, moving to private dentistry does offer a positive way forward for many NHS dentists. The survey results indicate that anxiety is less marked and there are high levels of happiness amongst predominantly private dentists. This could be due to their ability to provide a more rewarding range of treatments and the level of care they want, and their ability to manage patient expectations.

90% of predominantly NHS dentists say they are anxious or very anxious about the risk of complaints

This doesn't come as a surprise when considering the large numbers of NHS dentists who said they weren't happy that they could provide the level of care that they wanted to, or that they had enough time to manage patient expectations. But it's very worrying when you consider that 90% lack belief that the GDC understands the impact of its processes and procedures on the dental profession.

90%

A sample of personal comments provided by respondents:

No crystal ball can predict what will happen and with the current climate of litigation, I'm fearful of how long I'll even last.

The system is completely broken and it is heart-breaking for dentists and patients.

I think it is sad that we live in fear of our professional body. Having people who are not dentists tell dentists how to do their job is never going to go down well.

I am sick of being undervalued, undermined, told that I am greedy and scrutinised over minute details.

The profession is going to collapse unless something is done regarding the challenges in recruitment and retention of dentists.

We have created a profession that is scared of its own shadow.

Perhaps more powerful than all of the statistics put together are the pages and pages of comments that respondents added to the survey (a representative sample are shown above right). The comments paint a picture of a demoralised, dispirited profession that has lost faith in the key authorities that impact, not just on their work, but on their whole lives and there is much work to be done by bodies such as the NHS and the GDC to restore confidence.

The overall message from the 2019 Dentistry Confidence Monitor survey is that substantial change needs to happen and it needs to happen fast.

1

NHS Dentistry and the Reformed Contract

NHS dentistry has reached rock bottom. Politicians should stop interfering in the profession and imposing contracts that simply don't work. Either get dental treatment out of the NHS or fully support the profession and let dentists take control. Survey respondent

”



When it comes to the rollout of contract reform, there is a real sense of mistrust of the Government by the profession. This may well be connected to the feeling that many dentists have that they are being left in the dark about the specifics of the reformed contract and the impact it will have.

The lack of trust and communication comes through in the results and comments in the Dentistry Confidence Monitor survey. Whatever type of practice they work in – NHS or predominantly private – the majority of dentists believe the reformed contract for England will work well for Government, but not for patients or dentists.

... looking at the issues facing the wider NHS, it's difficult to feel optimistic that dentistry will suddenly become a high priority for the Government.



That's combined with the majority of all dentists surveyed saying that they feel unconfident about their knowledge of reform. So, while those in the profession feel they don't actually know all that much about the process, they also don't believe it will be a positive thing for dentists or patients, suggesting an underlying feeling that the Government simply doesn't have their best interests at heart.

Undoubtedly, this mistrust has built up over years as the profession has laboured under an NHS contract deemed 'unfit for purpose' by the parliamentary health select committee in 2008. And by the fact that despite that damning verdict over a decade ago, no action has yet been taken to find or implement something better. The lack of action, or perhaps lack of decisions, will have done little to convince dentists that the Government is prioritising the need to drive change.

Whilst some may argue that the contract reform process is at least trying to find a better approach to delivering NHS dentistry, many have been left bitterly disappointed that remuneration is still at least partially based on the UDA.

Many others are simply tired of a reform process that first began testing a new contract back in 2011. So, although there is a real desire for change to the current contractual arrangements, the profession doesn't appear convinced that the proposed alternatives will support them to deliver preventive focused dentistry within a sustainable business model.

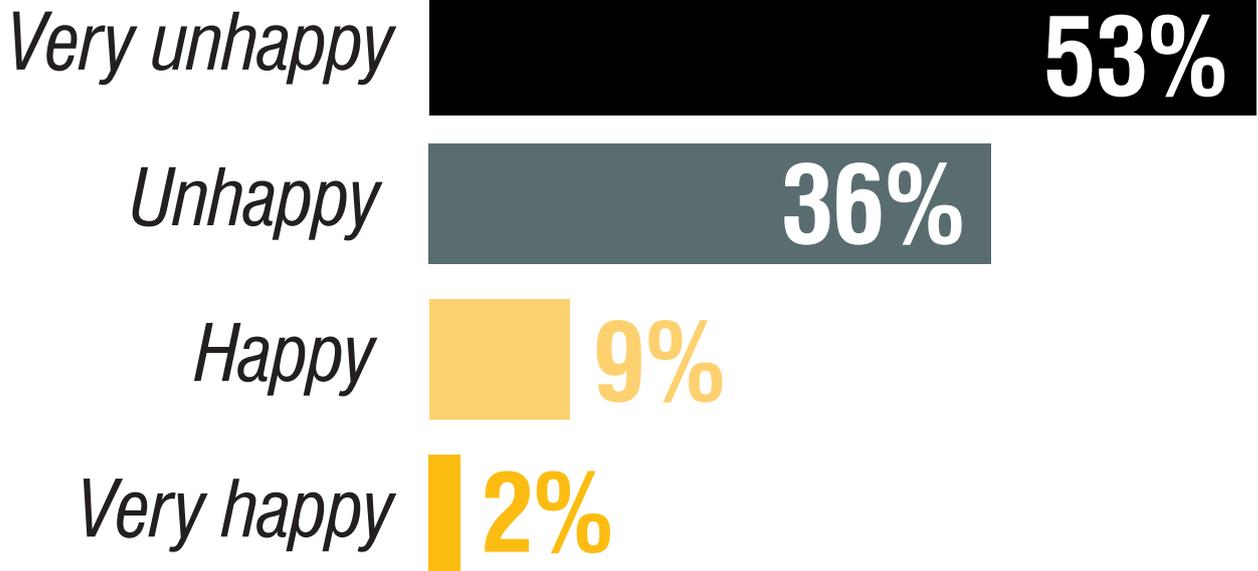
And, looking at the issues facing the wider NHS – many of which are reflected in dentistry, such as under-funding and recruitment challenges, which can only be exacerbated by the current political uncertainty – it's difficult to feel optimistic that dentistry will suddenly become a high priority for the Government.

Indeed, as the figures show, many believe that the existing contract, and the proposed reformed contract, actually work well for the Government, e.g. in the collection of increasing patient charges and financial clawback that is often redistributed throughout the NHS.

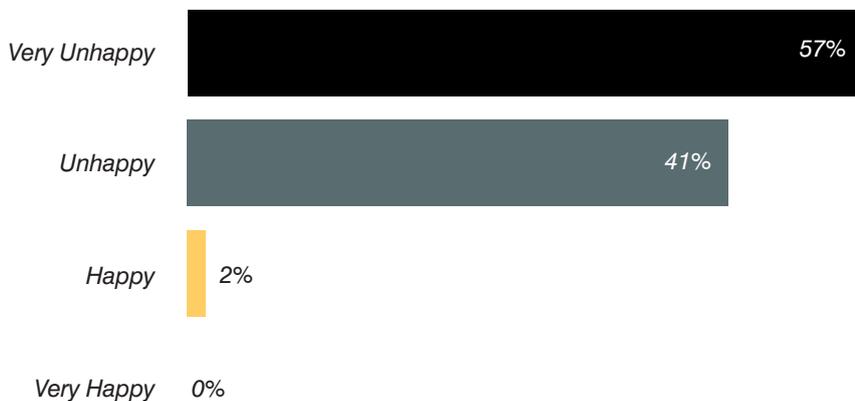
Which begs the question...what incentive is there for the Government to want to change the delivery of NHS dentistry in England?

Q. How happy are you with the **current NHS contract?**

Predominantly NHS Dentists 261 Respondents



Predominantly Private Dentists with some NHS involvement 92 Respondents



It is very hard to find any level of support for the existing NHS contract. A small percentage seem to make the contract work for them, but the vast majority feel the contract is not fit for purpose. Of course, this should come as little surprise as these results have been consistent for the five years of running the Dentistry Confidence Monitor survey.

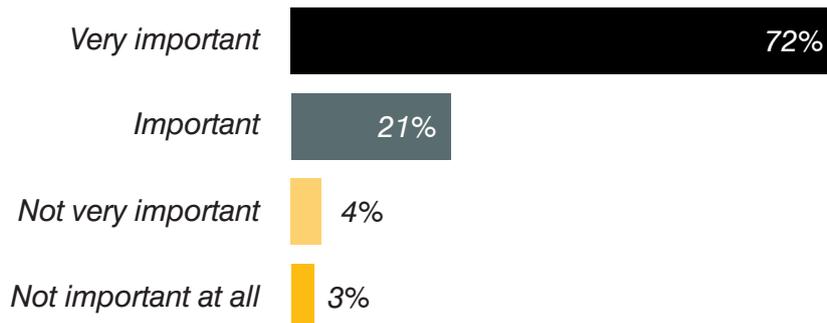
→ **Commentary : Louise Hunter : Practising Dentist**



I think the results speak volumes about the feelings of dentists and how they feel about the future of dentistry within the NHS. They are incredibly damning about how dentists working within the NHS feel about their future and their current working situation. Reading these results just reaffirms to me that I have totally done the right thing by moving towards private dentistry.

Q. How important do you think it is for the **current NHS contract** to change?

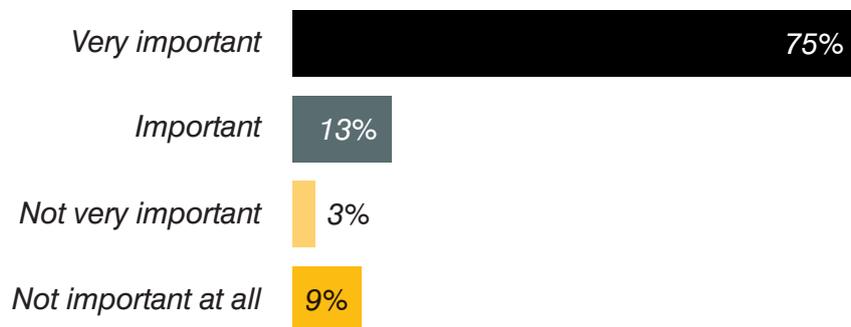
All Dentists with NHS involvement 353 Respondents



93%

OF DENTISTS WITH NHS INVOLVEMENT FEEL THAT IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE CURRENT NHS CONTRACT CHANGES

100% Private Dentists 67 Respondents



■ Very important ■ Important ■ Not very important ■ Not important at all

These figures are no surprise given the fact that almost 90% of NHS dentists said they were unhappy or very unhappy with the current contract. It is widely recognised across the profession that change is required but progress with the reform programme has been frustratingly slow.

The testing phase of first the pilots and then the prototypes has dragged on and on, with the date for a potential rollout being announced, only to be pushed back.

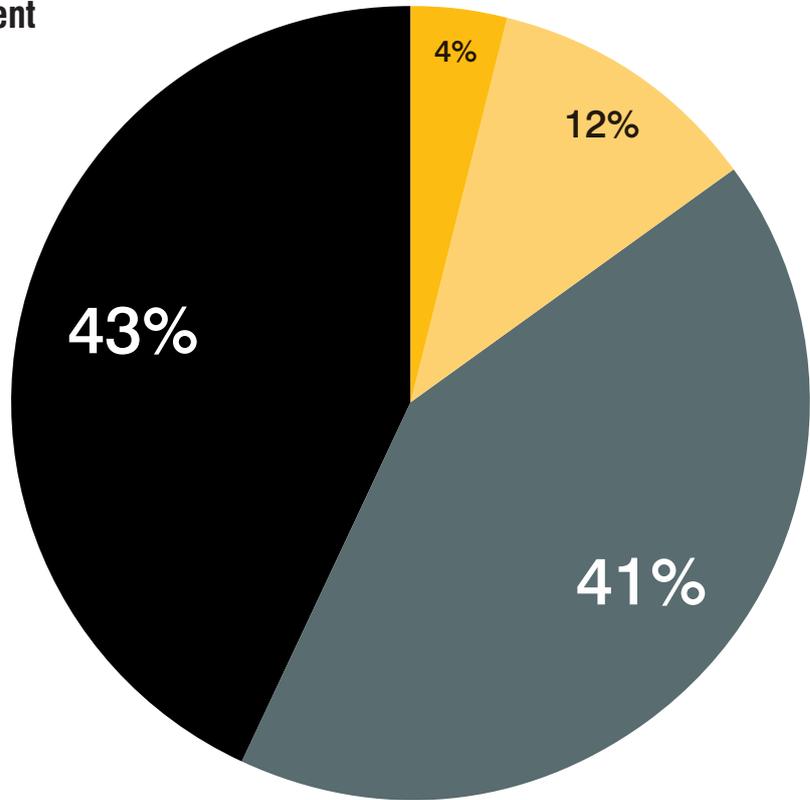
“ Not much information has been given out directly in terms of the new contract being trialled and it seems to have dragged on that long that it is confusing which pilot scheme is going to be the one used, so it is hard to plan for NHS certainty.

Survey respondent

Q. How confident are you in your knowledge of the proposed reformed NHS contract?

All Dentists with NHS involvement
353 Respondents

Very confident
Confident
Unconfident
Very unconfident



84% OF ALL DENTISTS WITH NHS INVOLVEMENT SAID THEY DIDN'T FEEL CONFIDENT IN THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THE PROPOSED NEW NHS CONTRACT

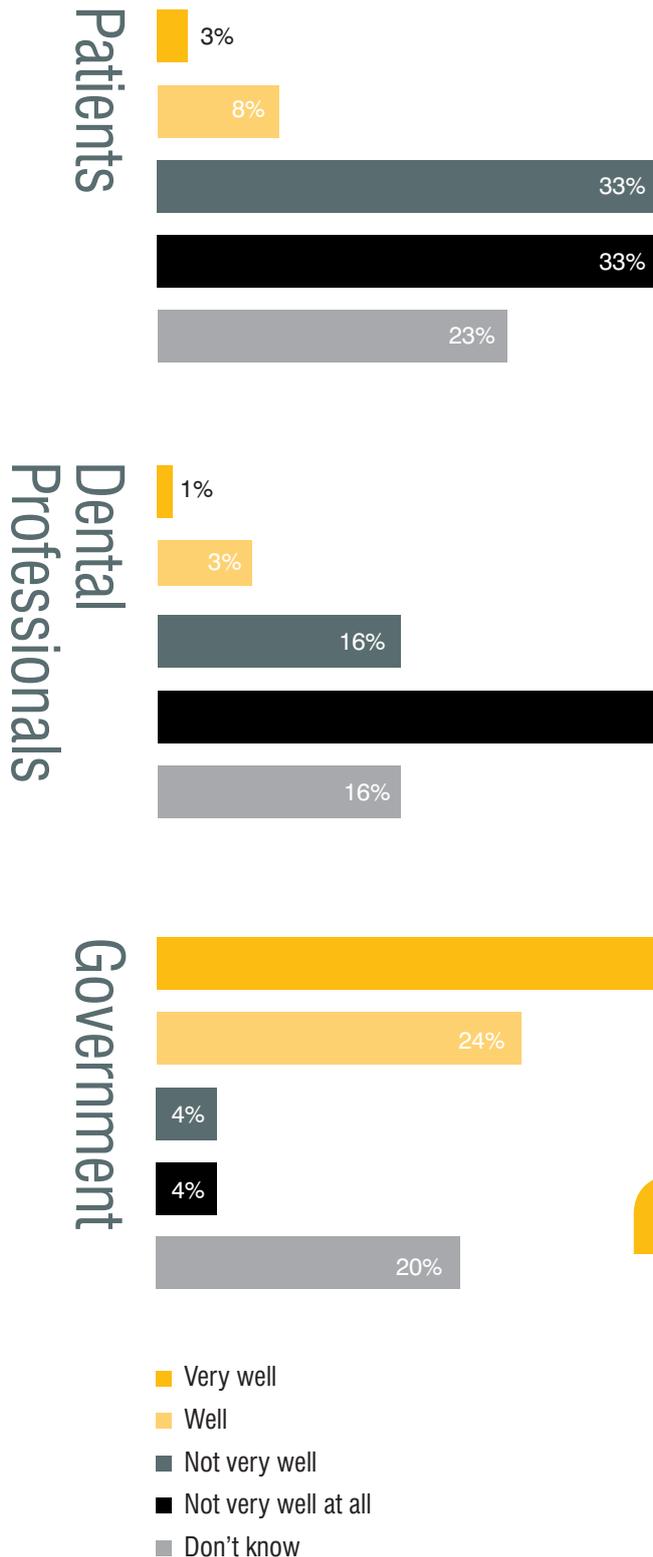
The majority of respondents to the survey say that they are unconfident in their knowledge about contract reform and don't feel they have sufficient information to make informed decisions about their future in dentistry.

This is despite so many having a clearly vested interest in the progress of reform and a desire for change to their existing circumstances.

It leaves worrying questions about how little detail about reform is filtering out to dentists outside the reform programme, leaving them woefully unprepared for any kind of rollout. These results have been echoed in the recent 'What Next for NHS Dentistry?' events that Practice Plan have hosted in recent months.

Q. From what you know, how well do you think the proposed **reformed NHS contract** will work for the following groups...?

All Dentists with NHS involvement 353 Respondents

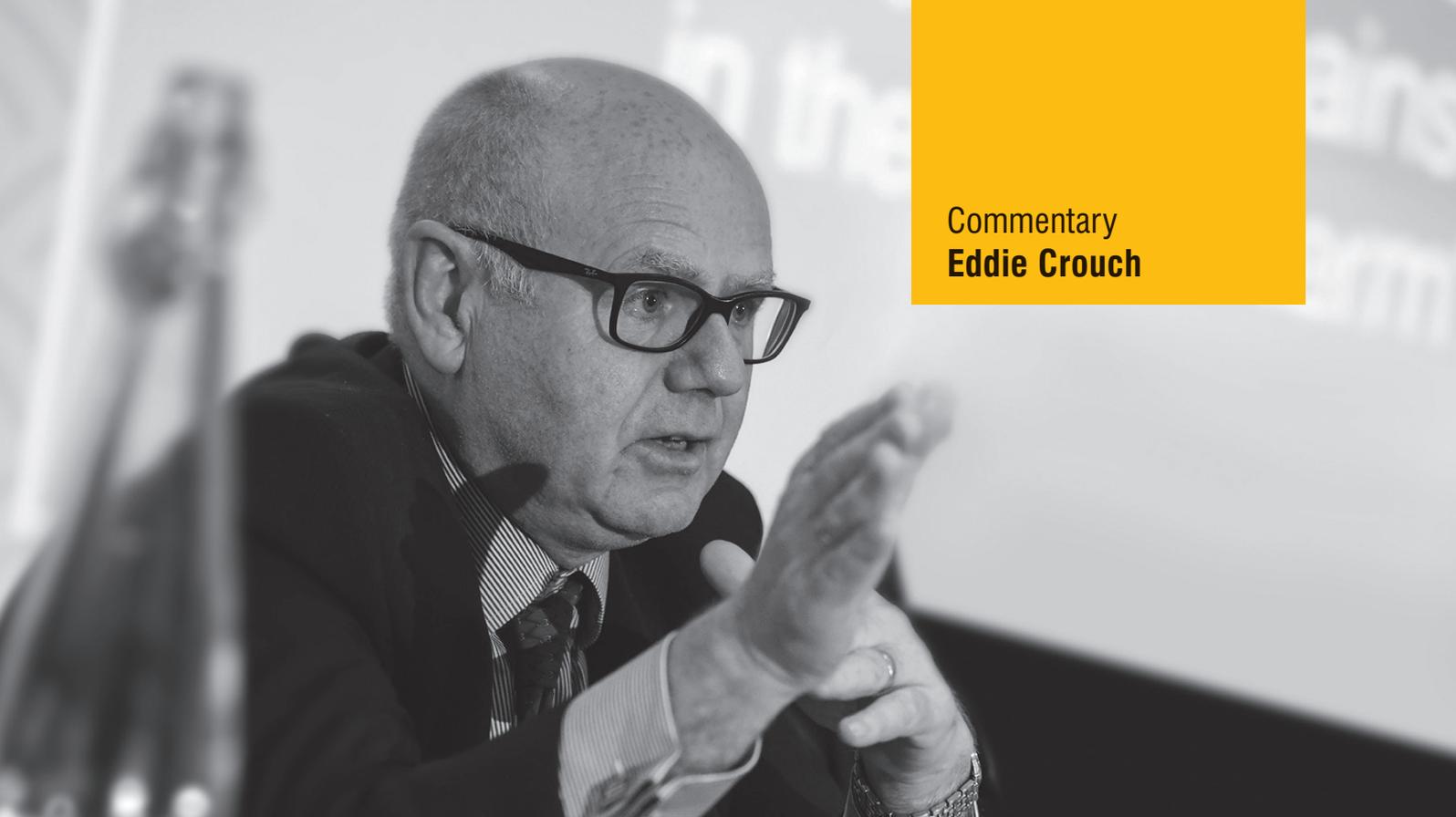


72%

OF RESPONDENTS BELIEVE THE PROPOSED REFORMED CONTRACT WILL BE GOOD FOR THE GOVERNMENT WITH ONLY 4% THINKING IT WILL WORK WELL FOR DENTAL PROFESSIONALS

“It’s going to be a disaster for everyone except the Government - de-skilling dentistry is killing the dental profession. It’s not a health system it’s a financial system to save money for the Government

Survey respondent



Commentary
Eddie Crouch

...if the contract reform continues to be drawn out then changes are important to the existing contract now and that is why flexible commissioning is something that is rising up the agenda as a matter of extreme importance.

”

Eddie Crouch is a practising dentist and vice chair of the BDA PEC. For many years he has been vocal on the need for NHS contract reform and is a critic of the Government's approach to this reform.

It is often galling when the BDA carry out member surveys that they are undermined by evidence submitted by the Department of Health to the DDRB. For example, the evidence submitted this year stated ‘...the BDA only canvassed their members, many of them undertaking private-only work.’

However, when independent surveys almost exactly mirror those done by the BDA, continued ignoring of the findings will not help turn around the massive problems currently being experienced in NHS dentistry.

Over 85% of respondents are unhappy with the current NHS contract. These are stark figures and it's little wonder, with ever-increasing demands on those delivering and inappropriate targets that are getting harder and harder to achieve each year.

90% thinking it's important or very important for change again is no surprise. If the contract reform continues to be drawn out then changes are important to the existing contract now and that is why flexible commissioning is something that is rising up the agenda as a matter of extreme importance.

What is also very clear is how little detail those outside the contract reform have of what is currently being developed. This poses some real challenges for the BDA and LDCs, and NHS England in educating those who are perhaps disenfranchised by the little they currently do know. The profession has become disillusioned, believing that any developed contract will do little to improve their working lives and be constructed to help commissioners as a priority.

The results also indicate the real concern that dentists see their workload increasing.

Since the crash of 2008 and the restrictions in public sector pay causing real pay cuts for the profession, and the ever-increasing costs associated with running clinical services, it is no surprise to see a lack of confidence in profitability.

The ogre of time-limited contracts is also a large concern, especially as many colleagues will have witnessed only recently the mess created by procurement in orthodontic services. Recent fluctuations in goodwill and the uncertainty of the future clearly are demonstrated in the lack of confidence in the value of practices.

Clearly, dentists are unsure of the future. This is reflected in the popularity of recent 'What Next for NHS Dentistry?' events organised by Practice Plan, as colleagues seek information to have at least a chance of informed decision-making. What is also clear is dentists now rely far more heavily on income from private dentistry and an extremely high percentage of colleagues see their future outside the NHS.

If the current and future workforce issues are to be addressed, the numbers saying they intend to retire early or leave the profession need serious attention from those that can do something to try to reverse this intention. Such data should not be ignored and NHS England and the Department of Health need to stop dismissing such surveys and wake up to the real risks to NHS patient care.

Q. From what you know about the proposed reformed NHS contract, how do you think your **profitability** and **workload** will be affected?

All Dentists with NHS involvement 353 Respondents

For each of the questions on this spread there was a fourth option of 'don't know'.

19% of respondents answered 'don't know' to profitability.

21% of respondents answered 'don't know' to workload.

- Less profitable/increased workloads
- No change
- More profitable/lower workloads

LESS MONEY

73% OF DENTISTS WITH NHS INVOLVEMENT FEEL THE REFORMED CONTRACT WILL RESULT IN A DECREASE IN PROFITABILITY

6% BELIEVE PROFITABILITY WILL REMAIN THE SAME

2% THINK PROFITABILITY WILL RISE WITH THE REFORMED CONTRACT

“ New contracts have traditionally been used as a front to impose funding cuts on dentists in order for them to provide more for less

Survey respondent

4% OF DENTISTS WITH NHS INVOLVEMENT
THINK WORKLOADS WILL DECREASE

14% BELIEVE WORKLOADS WILL
REMAIN THE SAME

61% FEEL THE REFORMED CONTRACT
WILL RESULT IN AN INCREASE IN
WORKLOADS

MORE WORK

Large numbers still believe that the proposed reformed NHS contract will negatively affect their workload and their profitability. This is despite three quarters of NHS dentists saying they aren't confident in their knowledge about the proposed contract reform. Taken together, these figures perfectly illustrate the profession's relationship with the Government.

Dentists are utterly unconfident in the Government. This was particularly highlighted by the comments respondents gave about how they believe contract reform will work well for those in charge but not for themselves and patients. While the profession is desperate for change, it is clear that they don't feel reform is the key to their salvation.

“ I can't help but think any new contract will involve more work and more ways not to be paid the same money. The Government can't help themselves but to make this mistake. ”

Survey respondent



The profession's rejection of the proposals by the NHS for a new contractual relationship is almost total. The issue that follows from this is whether the profession will act on its expressed intentions or sit on its hands for a little longer.

The numbers of dentists now claiming to be predominantly private would have been thought utterly impossible as little as 15 years ago. The profession is clearly on the move and it is possible that the introduction of the nebulous New Contract, and all it entails, may be the next stage in an evolving process that began back in the 1990s when the NHS clearly - but secretly - took an internal policy decision that NHS dentistry was costing too much, that NHS dentists were being overpaid and their NHS pensions were likely to cost a fortune and they (the dentists) would run two consecutive marathons before they actually left the NHS.

So far, much of their prediction has proved accurate. As fees have been devalued (by not allowing them to keep up with inflation, by increasing the level of work that is required to meet the standards deemed sufficient to claim NHS fees and by generally making the NHS a hostile working environment for the 21st century dentist), the scenario has played out much as planned by the NHS.

NHS dental patient numbers have fallen, there has been very little public reaction to a diminished NHS dental service and dentists have generally stuck to their grindstones as predicted.

The survey results show that a more fundamental move may well be underfoot

and that a new and even more significant move of professionals out of the NHS may be underway and has been going on generally unnoticed for the last five years or so. This is good because it is the only thing that is likely to persuade the NHS to sit up and take notice.

When NHS dentists claim to be 89% very unhappy with the NHS deal as it is, it has to be seen as significant.

The whole profession must know someone by now who has been negatively impacted by the tendering process for the allocation of various dental contracts.



The proposed New Contract is totally mistrusted - and rightly so - and is expected to produce more work for less profit (this is the NHS strategy at work; make the job less and less attractive, let them leave the NHS or fail to join the NHS system and then blame the dentists for not sticking by the NHS in its hour of need!). In short, NHS dentists are being manipulated and abused by the nation's favourite institution.

The figures show 24% of responding NHS dentists planning to take earlier retirement than planned - this will place the NHS pension system under more pressure.

They also show 46% moving further and further into the private sector (this is becoming an unstoppable movement) which makes general practice dentistry an unaffordable service for large parts of the UK population and they show 20% saying they will be changing their profession.

In all my years in dental politics, (now 50!!), I have never seen this particular proposal identified as a way forward and the size of the numbers claiming that they intend to do this, is nothing short of astonishing. Time-limited PDS contracts are yet another threat. The whole profession must know someone by now who has been negatively impacted by the tendering process for the allocation of various dental contracts.

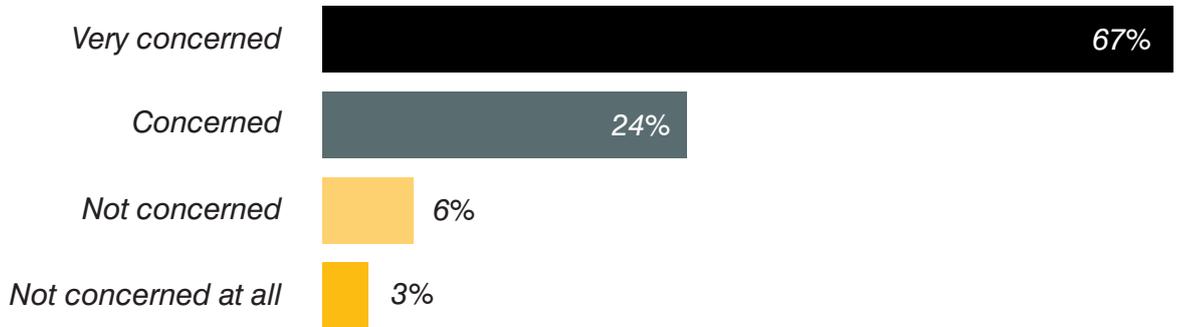
The resulting disaster for the profession has achieved nothing for the population who need the services, but it has given the NHS the exact thing they want - the power and the tools to control the dental profession.

Short-term contracts have nothing to do with medicine or dentistry, they are about control for the NHS and making the reducing NHS budget buy more services for less money.

John Renshaw has been a major player in dental politics for 50 years and was Chairman of the British Dental Association from 2000 to 2006. He works part time in private practice.

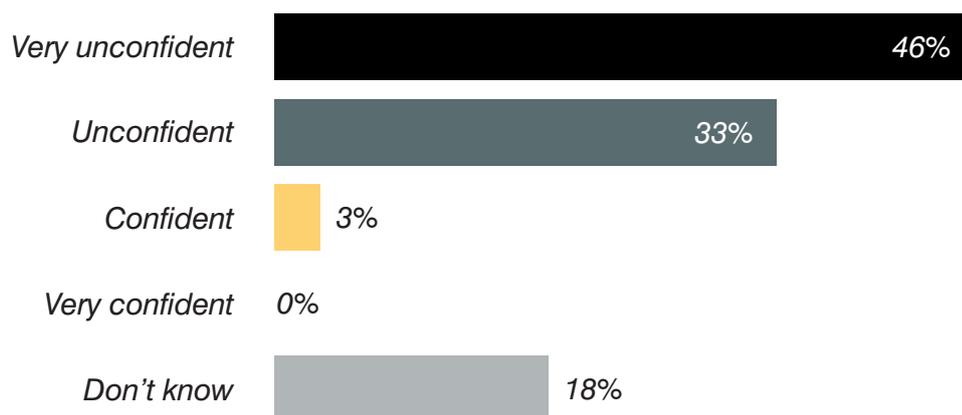
Q. How concerned are you about the possibility of **time-limited contracts** becoming widespread in NHS dentistry?

All Dentists with NHS involvement 353 Respondents



Q. In light of the proposed reformed contract, how confident are you that **NHS goodwill values** are sustainable?

All Dentists with NHS involvement 353 Respondents



79%

OF DENTISTS WITH NHS INVOLVEMENT FEEL THE REFORMED CONTRACT WILL NEGATIVELY IMPACT ON NHS GOODWILL VALUES

Q. Do you feel you have **sufficient information** to make informed decisions about your future in dentistry?

Predominantly NHS Dentists 261 Respondents



82%

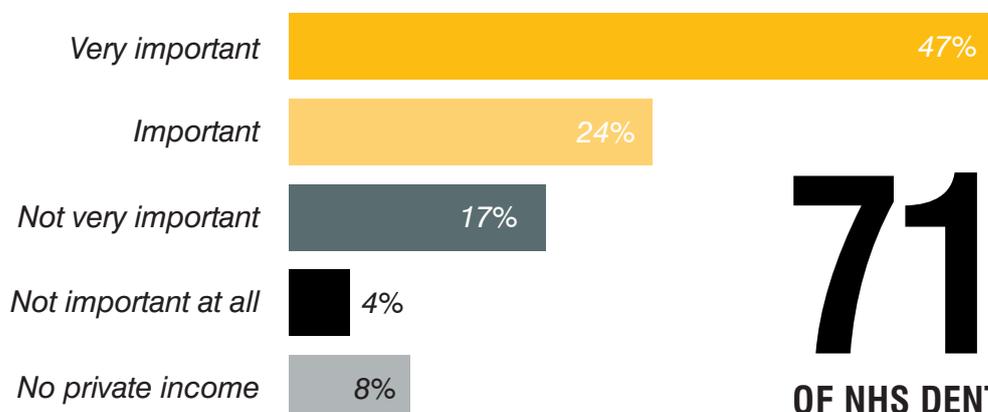
OF PREDOMINANTLY NHS DENTISTS DON'T FEEL THAT THEY HAVE SUFFICIENT INFORMATION TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR FUTURE

Predominantly Private Dentists 92 Respondents



Q. How important is **private income** in subsidising the NHS care you provide?

Predominantly NHS Dentists 261 Respondents



71%

OF NHS DENTISTS ARE RELIANT ON INCOME FROM PRIVATE TREATMENT TO SUBSIDISE THEIR NHS INCOME



Commentary
Farzeela Merali-Rupani

I am not surprised to see the large numbers of ‘Unhappy’ and ‘Very unhappy’ responses to the question about how clinicians feel about the current NHS contract.

Having worked within this contract since it was first introduced, I personally know how hard it can be to work in this way sometimes. Many of my colleagues have complained about how it can be physically and emotionally draining, which has led to people retiring early, moving to the private sector or even changing careers. It’s very sad that even younger clinicians who are at the early stages of their career feel like giving up after a few years of working within this system.

What’s also concerning is that the majority of clinicians and even patients are not too keen on the proposed changes as per the upcoming new contract. I can see the rationale behind the new contract, we all know that prevention is key.

However, whether it will work in practise remains to be seen. Additionally, whether clinicians and even patients will be more accepting of it as opposed to the current contract is also an interesting topic!

It’s clear that over 70% of the clinicians surveyed are and will be relying on their private income to subsidise their NHS income, so does this mean that access to NHS care will reduce further as more and more professionals decide to leave the NHS? That’s clearly not the aim of the new contract, however, it remains a concern.

Dr Farzeela Merali-Rupani has been a General Dental Practitioner for over 12 years, working in a variety of NHS and private practices. She is Head of Clinical at Dental Directory.

[the current NHS contract] can be physically and emotionally draining, which has led to people retiring early, moving to the private sector or even changing careers. ”

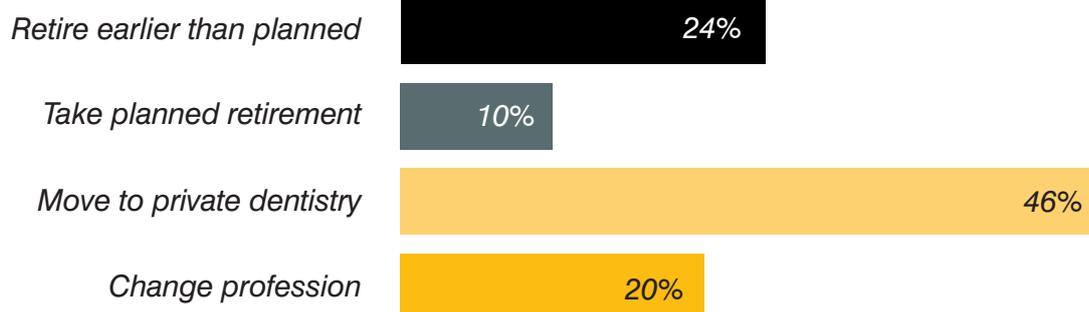
Q. Do you see yourself operating within the NHS in **five years' time**?

Predominantly NHS Dentists 261 Respondents



Q. If not staying within NHS dentistry, what do you **plan to do**?

Predominantly NHS Dentists 202 Respondents





I've been qualified and working in the NHS for 36 years and, year on year, I have witnessed personal, financial and professional attacks on our profession. Unless the culture can magically change overnight then my advice is for the profession to walk away from it.

Survey respondent

Q. As a percentage, what is your confidence level that dentistry has a **long-term future** within the NHS?

(0% being no confidence and 100% being extremely confident).

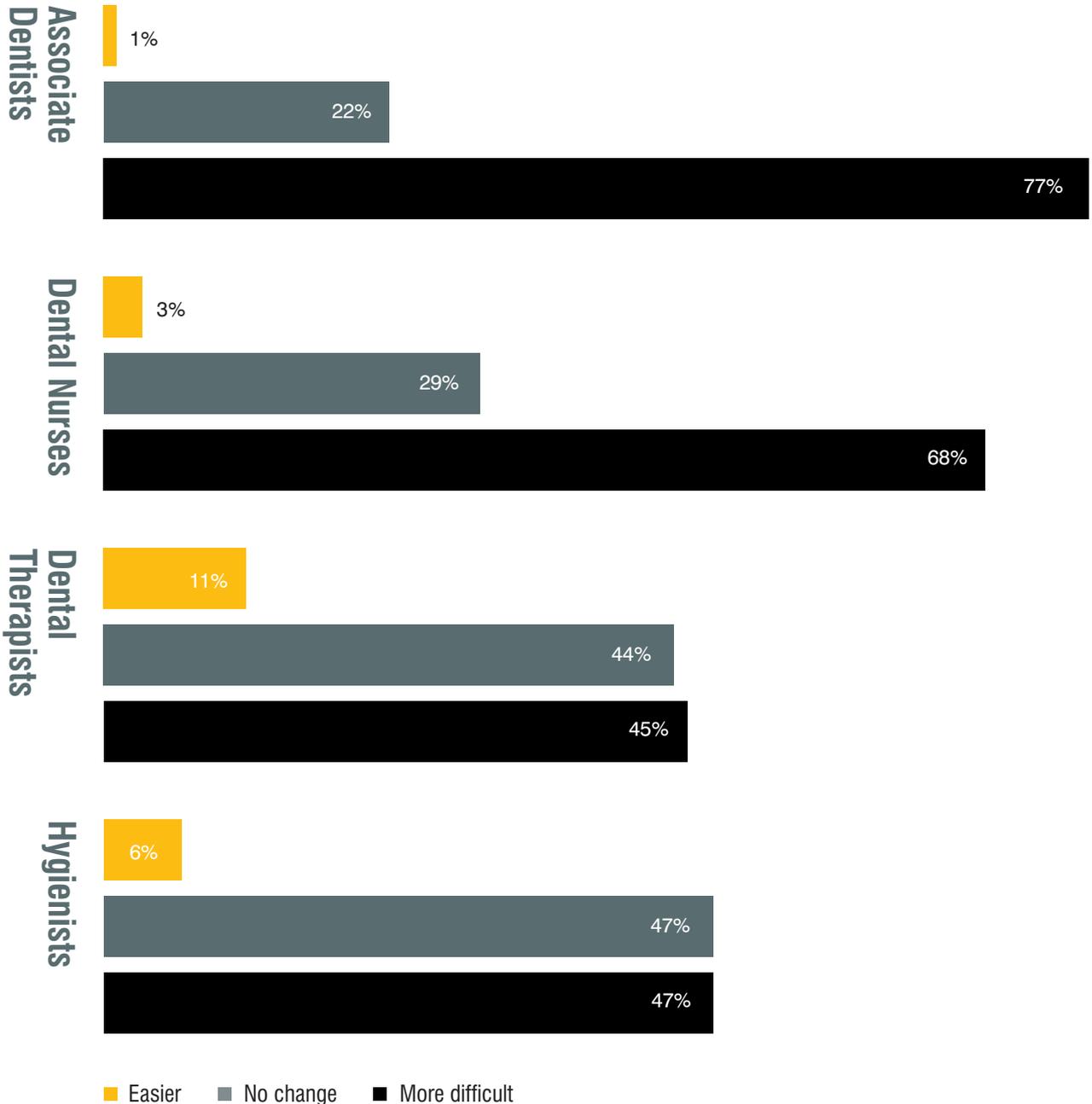
All Respondents 420

Confidence in the long-term future of NHS dentistry across all respondents is running at just...

21%

Q. Compared to five years ago, how easy do you find it to **recruit**?

Principal Dentists and Practice Owners *197 Respondents*



Attracting skilled staff is becoming more difficult for practices across the board. It seems the pool of available talent is reducing on all sides with fewer dentists coming into the profession, more dentists choosing to take early retirement and disillusioned dentists in the middle opting to change career. The potential impact of Brexit could also have an affect on the flow of dental professionals coming to the UK from Europe.

Q. As an associate, where do you see your future career?

All Associates 223 Respondents



Where are the practice owners of the future coming from?

Only 11% of associates have plans to own their own practice in the future, which suggests that potential returns of being a practice owner are outweighed by the additional workload and responsibility. Perhaps more worryingly, over a third of associates see their future outside of dentistry in a different career. Many practices are already struggling to recruit good associates - if the results above become reality, this situation is set to worsen significantly.

As a supplementary question to the one above, we asked associates to leave comments as to why they are not considering practice ownership as a future career move. The answers below are typical of the responses we received.

Q. Why are you not considering practice ownership?

“ Too much stress, red tape, bureaucracy and paperwork...Regulators have made owning a practice an impossible dream to come true... Too much political pressure and interference... Regulation is overly demanding and returns are not enough to compensate for this...I do not want the added stress of running a business on top of everything else...Too many unknowns regarding the future...Too much stress!

2

Dentistry and the GDC

The GDC has completely lost the confidence of the whole profession over the last 10 years - over regulating, ridiculously expensive and with no understanding of the real challenges faced by hardworking dentists on a day-to-day basis.

Survey respondent

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There has been much, often heated, debate in recent years about the apparent disconnect between the GDC and the 110,000 members of the dental profession it regulates. In this year's Dentistry Confidence Monitor survey we have introduced a section that captures respondents feelings towards the GDC and how it deals with complaints from patients.

Whether they work in the NHS or a private setting, dentists consistently say that the standards the regulator holds them to are unfeasible and a source of pressure, stress and anxiety.

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It will have come as little surprise to anyone who has had any involvement with dentists over recent years that, in the main, the profession feels negatively about the GDC.

Whether they work in the NHS or a private setting, dentists consistently say that the standards the regulator holds them to are unfeasible and a source of pressure, stress and anxiety.

And then, of course, there is also the issue of the Annual Retention Fee (ARF) that dentists are charged by the GDC. A fee which is at a level that the profession feels is hard to justify. This combination, and other factors, mean that the profession simply does not trust the GDC. They don't trust them to do right by them or by their patients.

For many, the fractious relationship between the GDC and the profession comes down to a lack of understanding by the regulator about the realistic practicalities of delivering dentistry today. Although, perhaps much of it can be attributed to the ill-judged advert placed by the GDC in 2014 in a national newspaper, encouraging patients to complain directly to them if they were unhappy about treatment.

That not adhering to the GDC standards can lead to serious consequences, both personal and professional, is one of the main reasons it is a source of pressure.

If a dentist is reported to the GDC for allegedly not meeting the standards, they may be entered into the Fitness to Practice process. The length of this process, and the stress it places on dentists, has been a well-worn topic across the profession for a long time.

It is, however, a process that is changing. Over recent years the GDC has shown greater self-awareness of the need to reform the way it manages the complaints process. This has led to the production of documents such as *Shifting The Balance* and *Moving Upstream* which detail the new approach, such as the introduction of using clinical case examiners.

These changes are in the relatively early stages and it is too soon to tell what long-term impact they will have. But the good intentions seem to be there. For some, however, these intentions need to be backed up by action, and for many it will be a case of too little too late.

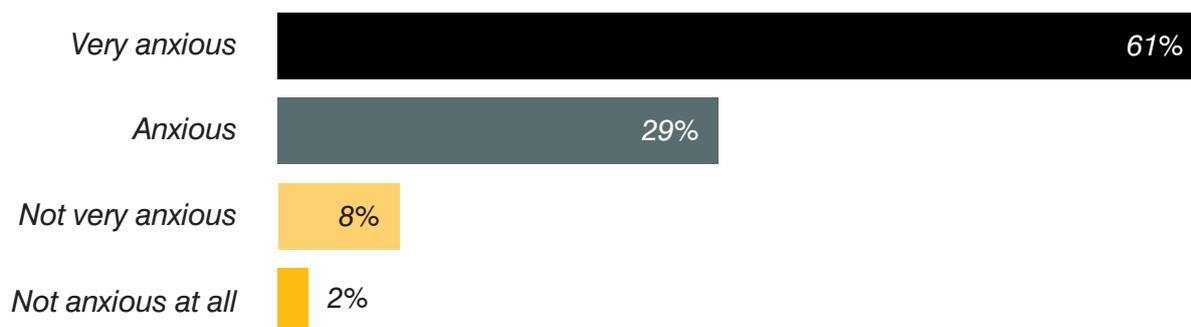
A common refrain among dentists is that there won't be any real change until the GDC itself is run by someone from a clinical dental background.

Whether the relationship between regulator and dentist can be repaired is yet to be seen. But the signs don't look good.

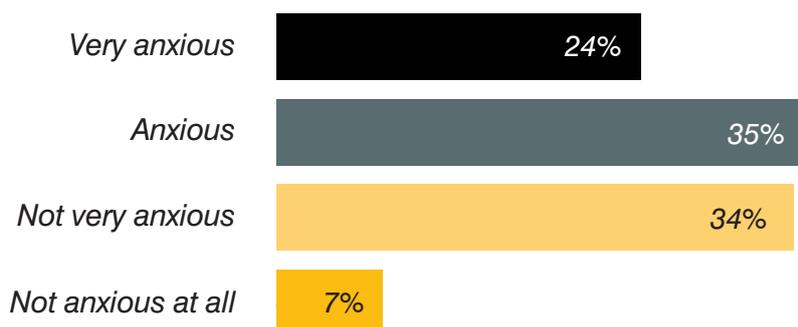
It appears dentists do not feel that it is better the devil you know and would rather take their chance with an unknown quantity.

Q. When thinking about working within your dental environment, how anxious are you about the **risk of complaints?**

Predominantly NHS Dentists 261 Respondents



Predominantly and 100% Private Dentists 159 Respondents



90% OF PREDOMINANTLY NHS DENTISTS FEEL ANXIOUS OR VERY ANXIOUS ABOUT THE RISK OF COMPLAINTS. ANXIETY LEVELS ARE LOWER IN PRIVATE DENTISTRY BUT ARE STILL SIGNIFICANT



Commentary : **Paul Graham** : Head of Dental, Christie & Co



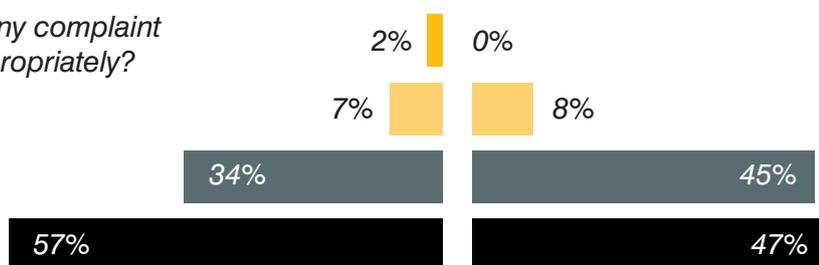
The market is becoming increasingly quality driven and geographically sensitive. Continued challenges with associate recruitment and retention, particularly amongst corporate purchasers, has driven demand towards urban locations. Associate shortages are likely influenced by the fear and anxiety amongst the industry regarding the lack of support from the GDC, which can be clearly identified in the survey responses received. A large majority of respondents answered either 'Very unconfident or Unconfident' to the GDC handling complaints properly and doing a good job in protecting the public.

Q. How confident are you that the GDC:

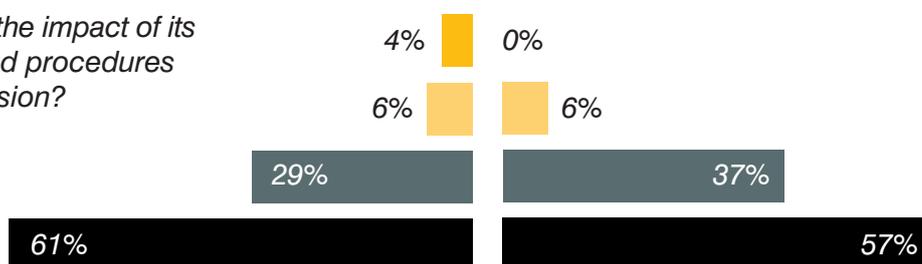
Predominantly NHS Dentists Predominantly and 100% Private Dentists

261 Respondents 159 Respondents

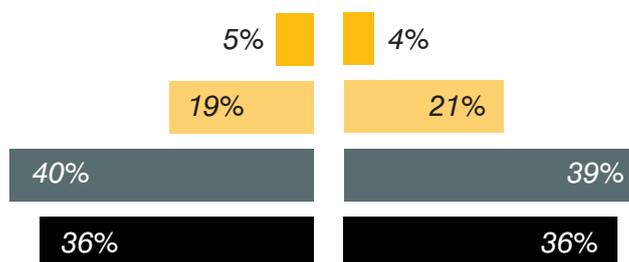
1. Would handle any complaint against you appropriately?



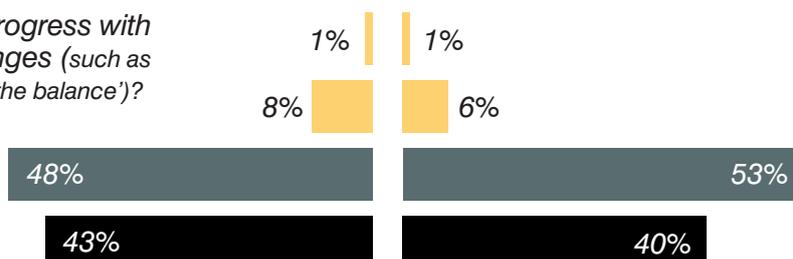
2. Understands the impact of its processes and procedures on the profession?



3. Is doing a good job in protecting the public?



4. Is making sufficient progress with addressing its challenges (such as those outlined in 'Shifting the balance')?



■ Very confident
 ■ Confident
 ■ Unconfident
 ■ Very unconfident

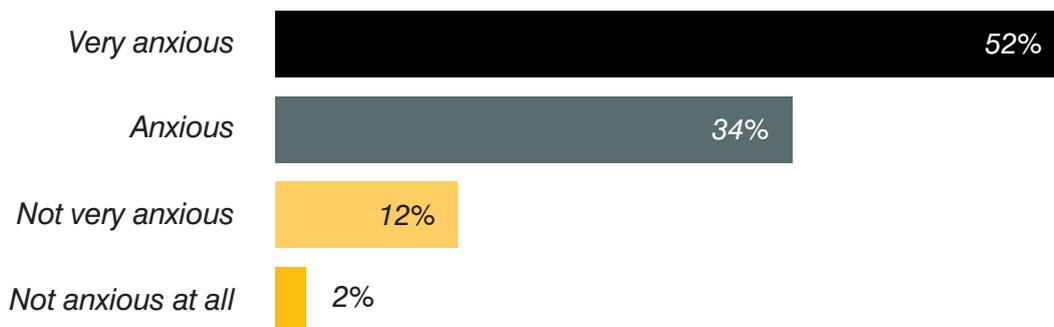


Time and again dental professionals are required to meet some 'gold standard' as routine rather than aspirational. Such demands make this nearly impossible in the day-to-day practise of good quality dentistry.

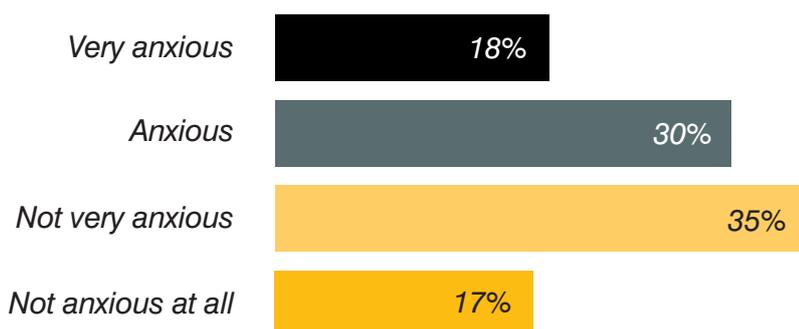
Survey respondent

Q. When working within your dental environment, how anxious are you about your ability to meet the **standards set by the GDC?**

Predominantly NHS Dentists 261 Respondents



Predominantly and 100% Private Dentists 159 Respondents



Q. How likely are you to support the idea of the **GDC being dissolved** and a single regulator being formed to prevent the duplication of other regulators' duties?

All Respondents 420 Respondents



...if so many dental registrants would rather take the devil they don't know than the one they do, then that is a pretty huge indictment of the damage the GDC has to repair.

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Simon Thackeray has been a GDP since 1991, first in the NHS, and then private practice. Simon sits on the GDPC committee of the BDA and is also a past BDA Branch President for South Yorkshire. He also works as an expert witness.

Everybody still seems uniformly anxious about complaints, and in my opinion this doesn't seem to be reducing fast enough.

At least those in private dentistry have a higher percentage of people (52% vs 14%) who are not very or not at all anxious. This has to be down to the NHS system and the time constraints, plus the huge opportunities for patients and dentists to misunderstand what is actually available on the NHS, and dare I say it, sometimes the demographic of some of those patients who use the NHS.

The GDC certainly has a lot to answer for, and despite it improving slowly in some respects, it is still at least partially responsible for a culture of fear in dentistry. In addition, I remain to be convinced that the Local Area Teams and NHS England are not also a large part of the 'sword of Damocles' that hangs over NHS practitioners.

Is NHS vs private dentistry really all that different that one section of practitioners are four times less anxious than another group?

The survey would suggest this, and the only difference is down to the type of system and the type of patients that are being treated. Additionally, who can blame dentists for feeling anxious about complaints, given the ease with which patients can complain and the apparent emphasis on '*the customer is always right*' by the GDC and LATs?

Even the indemnifiers add to this stress by appearing to roll over and settle, and then use their discretion to increase membership costs or even refuse cover.

Again, the same sort of results are seen regarding the fear that dentists can't meet the GDC standards. The same argument of time and money is going to be perpetually used to explain this, but the GDC, in my opinion, is guilty of not exposing the NHS for being part of the problem through not being funded sufficiently to allow dentists to generally feel confident in meeting the standards.

The GDC will ALWAYS say it is down to the individual registrant to meet standards, which is true, but this nicely sidesteps the huge pile of elephant manure from the herd of elephants in the room, which is that the NHS dental system is broken, and relying on the mental health of those dentists in it to remain strong enough to continue to support it because of their professionalism.

The GDC will never accept this as it is conveniently not part of its remit, but this then leads onto the profession having little or no confidence in the GDC, in its ability to handle complaints, to improve its progress, and to ensure its statutory requirement to protect the public.

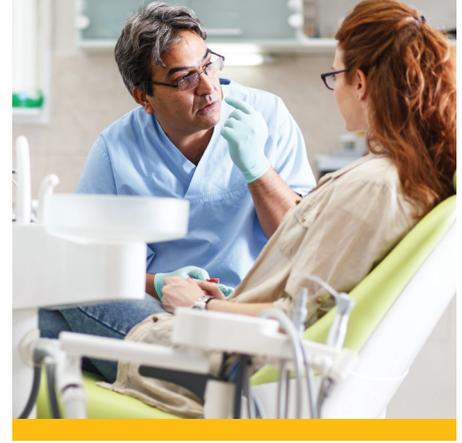
So much so, it appears most practitioners would like to see the GDC replaced by a super regulator. I think we need to be careful of not jumping out of the frying pan into the fire, but if so many dental registrants would rather take the devil they don't know than the one they do, then that is a pretty huge indictment of the damage the GDC has to repair.

3

Comparing Happiness Levels in NHS and Private Dentistry

**A miserable, soul destroying
job with no improvement
in pay for over a decade...
a national disgrace.** Survey respondent

”



Increasing focus on mental health issues and general well-being has demonstrated the all-around importance of being happy in your work. It is, after all, where most people spend the majority of their day. Negative feelings generated at work can be difficult to leave behind at home time and can instead begin to impact your personal life too.

Fitness to Practise cases regarding communicating effectively increased by 52% between 2014 - 2017

When it comes to being happy in their role, the sector they work in seems to make a huge impact to dentists.

This is the third time we have asked private and NHS dentists about their happiness to be able to carry out their work. And it is the third time that it has shown a stark contrast in the way dentists feel – with those in the NHS reporting being less happy and more stressed than their private counterparts.

Working under an NHS contract means there is a need to hit activity targets and deliver a certain number of treatments/ UDAs. If these targets are not met, the practice may face financial clawback.

Often dentists in the NHS describe feeling as if they are on a 'treadmill' as they try to achieve their targets and avoid clawback.



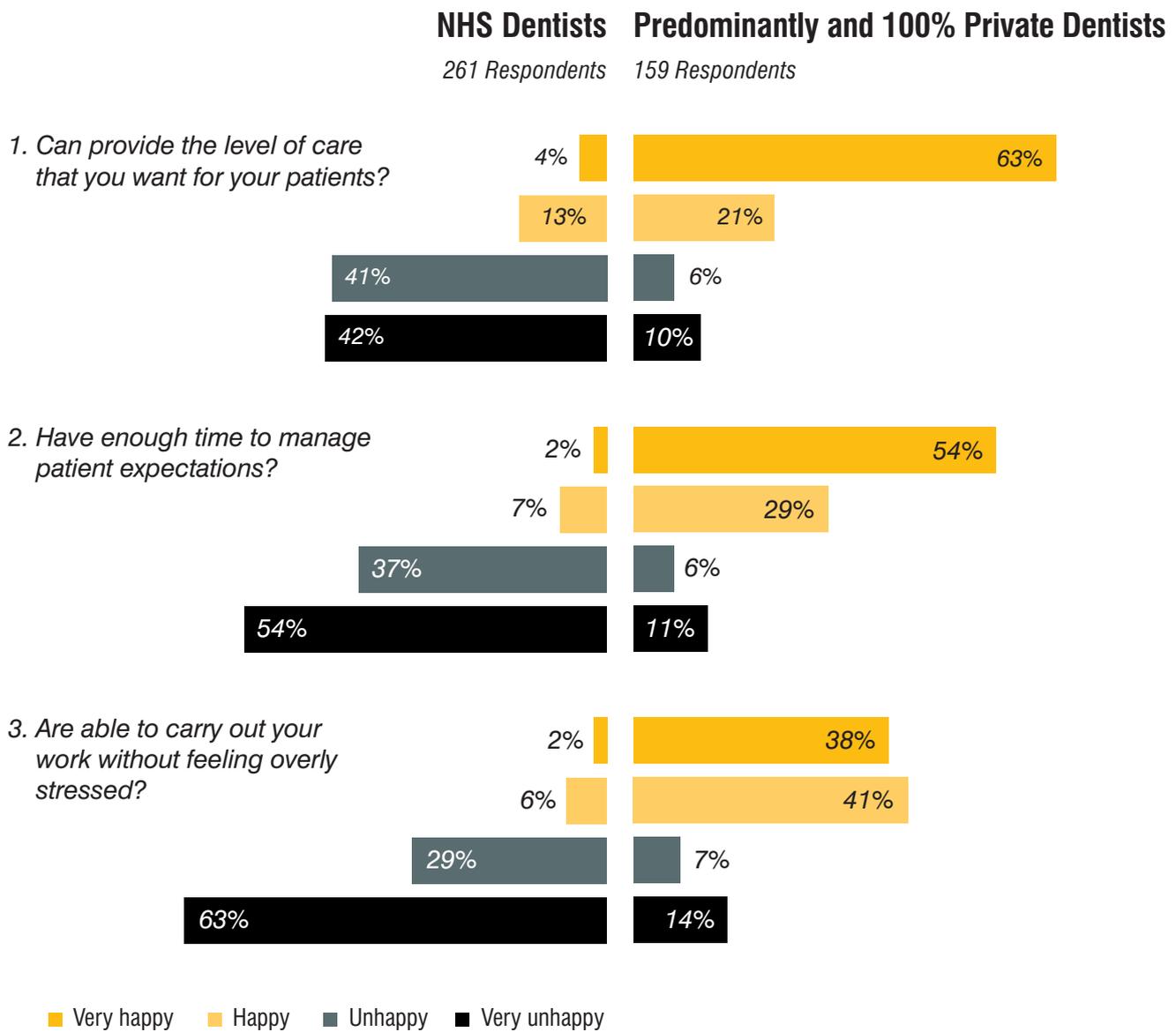
The feeling of not having enough time to spend with patients can lead to other concerns. Building up rapport, trust and good communication with patients is vital in creating strong relationships.

And this is key in reducing the risk of receiving a complaint and mitigating against it escalating into litigation – a concern for all dentists.

The number of 'Fitness to Practise' cases regarding communicating effectively are increasing, according to statistics from the GDC. Between 2014 and 2017 there was a 52% increase in these kinds of cases.

Dentists are very aware that patients generally don't sue their dentists if they like them. However, those in the NHS don't feel they have enough time to spend with patients to develop those kinds of relationships – which is one more source of stress for them.

Q. When thinking about working within your environment, how **happy** are you that you:



While the positivity of those dentists working predominantly with private patients should offer the dental profession some hope, the responses from their NHS colleagues may go some way to explaining why so many of them feel that their role is having a negative effect on their mental health.

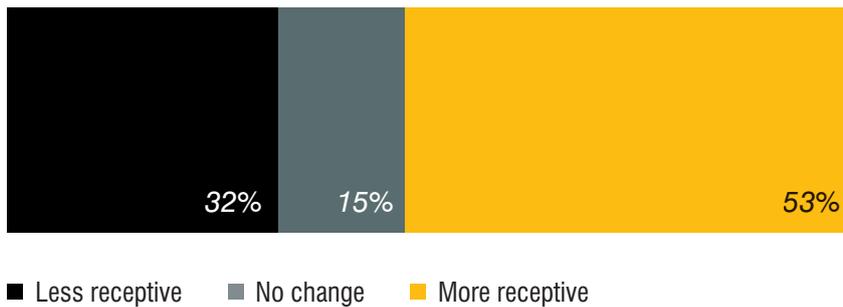


In NHS dentistry, the expectation to provide ‘perfect textbook’ dentistry under such pressure is unrealistic.

Survey respondent

Q. How **receptive** do you think patients are to private dentistry now compared to ten years ago?

Predominantly NHS Dentists 261 Respondents



89%

OF PRIVATE DENTISTS FEEL THAT PATIENTS ARE MORE RECEPTIVE TO PRIVATE DENTISTRY COMPARED TO TEN YEARS AGO

Predominantly and 100% Private Dentists 159 Respondents



If this subjective evidence is to be believed, it shows a significant shift in public attitudes to private dentistry. It also provides reassurance for NHS dentists looking to make the move to private dentistry that their NHS patients are more likely to stay with the practice during and after the conversion process.

→ Commentary : Paul Graham : Head of Dental, Christie & Co



Patients receive limited treatment on the NHS, and it could be argued that it's shifting towards a place where it's considered an emergency service. Despite the horror stories regarding access to NHS dentistry, looking at popular culture, everyone in the public eye has good teeth. This is a general comment about dentistry; we believe the profile of dentistry is greater than it's ever been and because of the limited treatments available on the NHS, patients will continue to spend their disposable income on private treatment. This ranges from essential dental maintenance to cosmetic and aesthetic options that have become extremely popular in recent years.

4

The Mental Health of Dental Professionals

I feel like I'm struggling to keep my head above water, whilst desperately trying to keep abreast of constantly changing rules. There are days when I wonder why I chose this career. Survey respondent

”



Mental health is, thankfully, a topic that is now being discussed more openly. For the first time, we have included a section of questions that seek to understand the levels of stress within the dental sector and their effects on the mental health of dental professionals. The results were stark and highly concerning.

Perhaps reflecting the changes in wider society, mental health has become a much-discussed topic in dentistry over recent years.

The high levels of stress and anxiety have been widely researched and reported on by organisations including the BDA. And the high level of suicide among dentists has been known for some time. Research by the BDA published in 2019 showed almost a fifth of dentists had seriously thought about taking their own lives.

Research by the BDA published in 2015 showed almost a fifth of dentists had seriously thought about taking their own lives.

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However, it appears that despite the growing awareness and increasing conversations about this issue, a lot of people are still unsure about where to turn for support. Fortunately, the support services for dentists are growing. There are long-established organisations such as the BDA Benevolent Fund and the Dental Health Support Trust, which recently said that more people than ever before are accessing their service.

And there are newer groups emerging all the time, such as the Mental Dental Facebook group which gained over 5,000 members in just two years, and, most recently, the Confidential helpline.

It feels rather bittersweet that these services are being so well used, especially when you consider that many dentists who may also need help are not aware of them. Of course, there can be all kinds of reasons why someone may be struggling with poor mental health – both personal and professional.

However, when asked, the majority of dentists say that their current role has had a negative effect on their mental health.

Although, it is worth noting that over 30% more NHS dentists say this compared to private and almost a quarter of private dentists say it has had a positive effect.

Given the amount of time we spend at work, it is unsurprising that it will have some kind of impact on our mental wellbeing. And, perhaps when that work takes place in a healthcare setting, there will always be higher levels of stress and anxiety.

When you add to that some of the factors previously mentioned in this report – a litigious society, uncertainty around the future NHS contract, a pervasive feeling of mistrust of the powers that be and a fractured relationship with the regulator – there seems an almost grim inevitability to the way dentists are feeling.

The question that now has to be asked is - 'How can that be changed?'

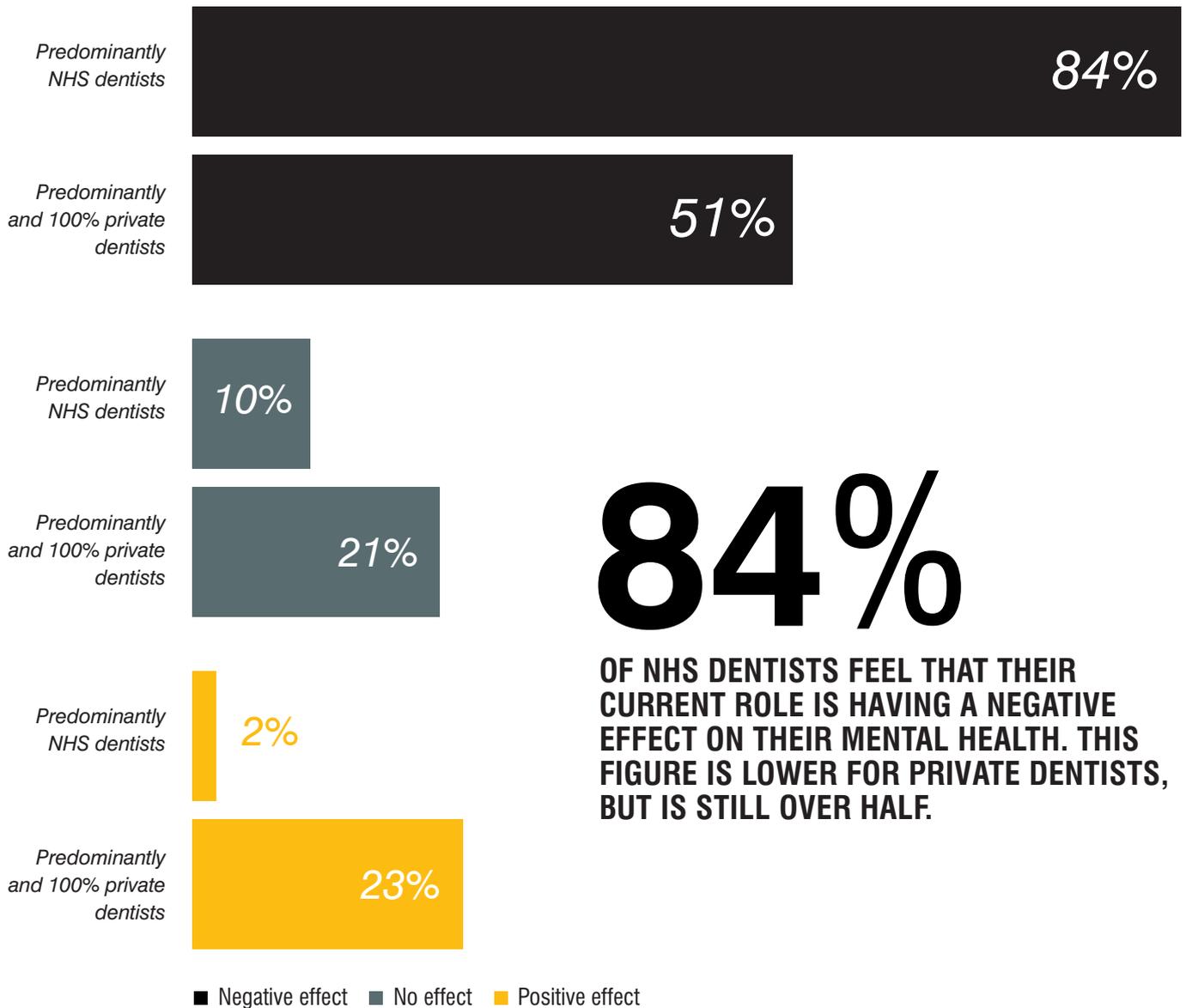
Having support services available for people in need is obviously a wonderful thing. But what more can those organisations and bodies involved in the running of dentistry be doing to reduce the number of people reaching that point in the first place? Unless this question is asked and given serious consideration, the profession could be heading for a mental health crisis. If we're not already there.

Q. Do you feel that your current role has had an effect on your **mental health**?

All Dentists 420 Respondents

(Predominantly NHS 261, All private 159)

4% of predominantly NHS respondents and 5% of all private respondents chose the option to 'rather not say'



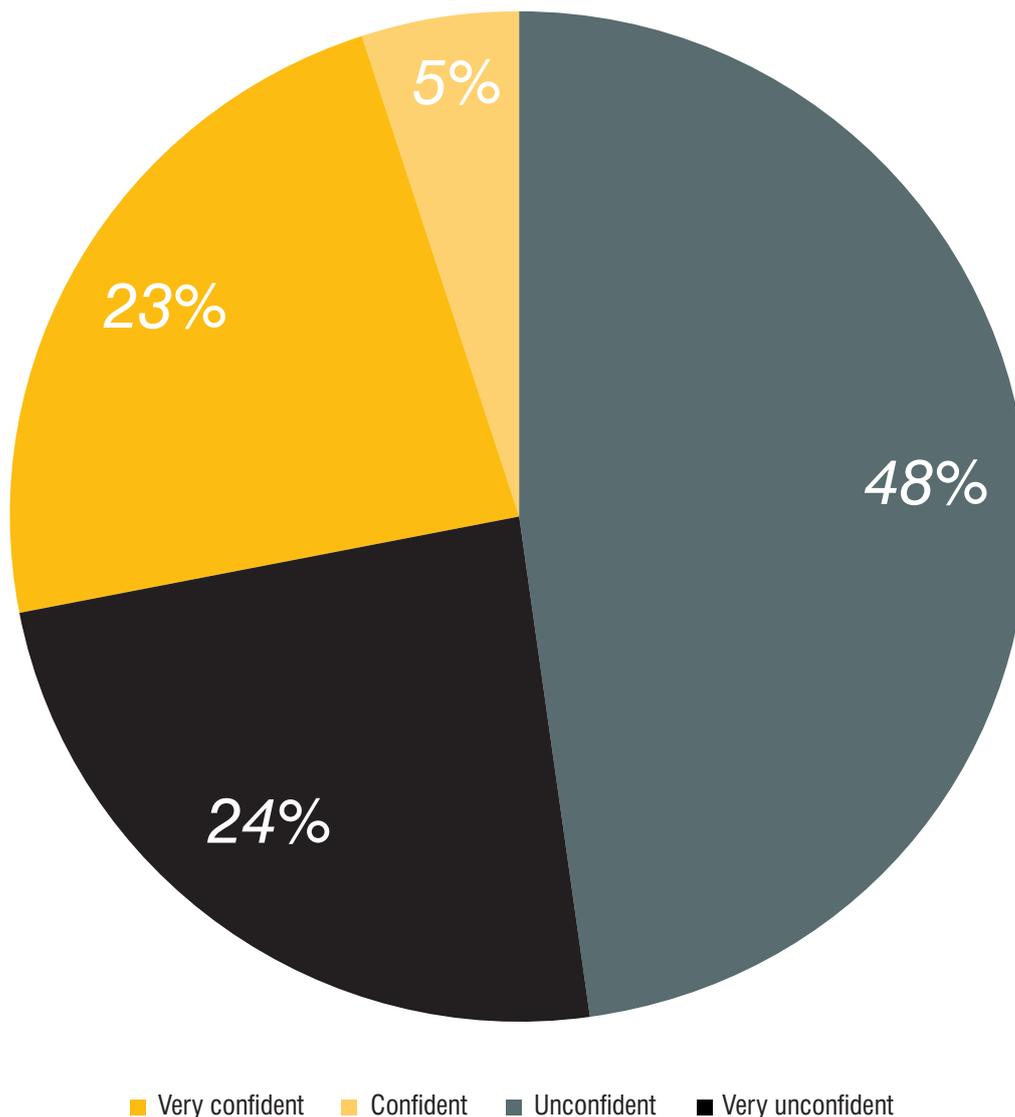
→ **Commentary : Rory O'Connor : Dentists' Health Support Trust**



In comparison with other health professionals, the general mood of those working in the NHS is challenging with real concerns about the pressures placed on staff delivering care. With regard to the reformed contract, one has to accept that change is difficult. However, notwithstanding that, there does appear to be a real sense that the reformed dental contract will not reduce people's concerns, with most people believing that their workload will increase and that issues such as stress are likely to increase also.

Q. If you were feeling overly stressed or worried about your **mental health**, how confident are you in knowing which organisation to turn to for help?

All Dentists 420 Respondents



72% OF DENTISTS DO NOT FEEL CONFIDENT IN WHERE TO LOOK FOR HELP IF THEIR MENTAL HEALTH IS SUFFERING. THIS IS A WORRYING RESULT THAT COULD LEAD TO DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES.

Q. Which of the following organisations would you turn to if you were in need of **support**?

Respondents were able to tick more than one answer in response to this question. Results were spread evenly across the organisations listed below with some dentists also stating other sources of support such as their GP or family and friends. As such, we have decided to list the organisations along with their contact details. We would encourage anyone reading this report who might be feeling stressed or struggling with their own mental health to seek support. Each of the organisations listed have specialist advisers and counsellors who can help you through your specific situation.



Maybe most well-known for their work with suicide prevention, people can actually contact Samaritans to talk about all sorts of issues. They listen and support callers, they also signpost to specialist organisations who can help with specific problems.

www.samaritans.org Call free on 116 123

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The BDA Benevolent Fund provides financial aid to dental students, dentists and their families at all stages of their career. When individuals don't have the funds to pay for some of the normal things in life, like rent or food, the fund can offer help and support.

www.bdabenevolentfund.org.uk 0207 486 4994

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Confidential's purpose is to provide emotional first aid for dentists in distress. Manned by practising and retired dentists, the service allows you to offload and talk through your issues in complete confidence and signposts you to further organisations if appropriate.

www.confidential-helpline.org 0333 987 5158

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The Dentists' Health Support Programme specialises in helping dental professionals with addiction issues relating to alcohol, drugs, eating disorders and other health problems to talk about their issues and get their life back on track.

www.dentistshealthsupporttrust.org 0207 224 4671

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Relate is the UK's largest provider of relationship support and can offer support on relationships with family, partners and colleagues. They offer counselling support by telephone, face-to-face or via a webcam. Their website has a full list of branches across the UK.

www.relate.org.uk

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Outside the options respondents were given within the survey, a number of dentists also referenced 'Mental Dental' a closed Facebook group that provides a safe space to discuss and get further information about mental health services for dentists.

Search Facebook for Mental Dental - a group for dentists in crisis

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Sometimes, talking anonymously to someone who will listen both empathically and sympathetically might be all that is needed.

”

Jeremy Cooper is a practising dentist with over 30 years' experience. He is responsible for Confidential - the 24-hour one-stop-shop helpline to provide emotional support to dental professionals.

Dentistry is one of the most stressful professions, and the negative effect that this has upon the individual is obvious and recognised by dentists. Working within the NHS, compounds this effect, and over 80% of dentists report the negative effects on their mental health, compared to around 50% within the private sector.

The final questions in the survey set out to determine how well dentists felt informed of who to turn to when they felt stressed or had mental health issues. More than 70% felt in some way unconfident in this regard.

Even when given the names of various organisations, a significant number said they couldn't be sure they would contact them.

This is alarming!

Whether practitioners fully know of the work and scope of the different organisations mentioned in the survey cannot be determined from the survey.

Many respondents may have heard of the BDA Benevolent Fund but may be unaware of their role, or that they can access the organisation regardless of whether they are a BDA member or not.

Similarly, do people realise that the Dentists' Health Support Trust are able to help them with drug, alcohol or other health matters? Dentists in crisis will deal with their problems in different ways, and an analysis of the results from the survey echo this fact.

Depending on the problem, they may turn to a spouse or family member, healthcare practitioner, social media or another organisation. There is no doubt the profession needs easily accessible help when faced with a crisis.

Confidential is a recently launched organisation that is now available to help dentists with problems that are causing stress, whether they be personal or work related. All volunteers are either practising or retired dentists, and therefore likely to understand many of the issues at hand.

Sometimes, talking anonymously to someone who will listen both empathically and sympathetically might be all that is needed.

A colleague might assist a dentist in coming to a decision that is right for them. At other times Confidential might offer advice on other existing organisations and companies who could help sort a particular problem out.

THANK YOU

Thank you for taking the time to read the results of this year's **Dentistry Confidence Monitor** survey. If you have any comments or suggestions on how future surveys might be compiled or improved, we would love to hear from you.

You can contact the Practice Plan Team at:

hello@practiceplan.co.uk

Or you can call us on **01691 684120**

We would like to say a big thank you to all the key industry professionals who have provided commentary for this report and to all the dental professionals who took the time to complete the survey and share their thoughts on the topics that are important to them.

The need for change is a key theme that runs through the results. In order to help bring about that change, it is vital that the voice of the profession is heard and through this survey you have spoken loud and clear.

If you are one of the 84% of predominantly NHS dentists who said they didn't feel confident in their knowledge of the reformed NHS contract, then attending one of our FREE *'What Next for NHS Dentistry?'* events could help.

Visit nhs.practiceplan.co.uk/events for more information or to book a place on future events.

Practiceplan
The business of dentistry

Part of the **WESLEYAN** Group



The profession should take a big step back and look objectively at the trajectory of change over the last 40 years or so, and at the drivers for those changes - the penny will drop. I think things will almost certainly continue to get worse for patients, dentists and their staff.

Survey respondent