



Jeane Freeman MSP
By email

27 November 2020

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

Capital funding for dental services

I am writing to you concerning the ongoing challenges facing dental services, and the knock-on effect this is having on the patients who need our care.

Dentists in Scotland are continuing to operate at a fraction of their former capacity. 'Fallow time' – the gap between procedures designed to reduce the risk of viral transmission, and mandated in guidance since the first lockdown – remains the single biggest limiting factor to restoring access to dentistry to anything resembling pre-pandemic levels.

Recent changes to Standard Operating Procedures to help practices reduce fallow time are welcome. However, if we are to translate new guidance into an actual boost in patient numbers, we need your help.

Reductions in fallow time are contingent on dentists securing a level of air change per hour (ACH) within their surgeries that in many cases is impossible without new mechanical ventilation. We recently discussed ventilation with the CDO, and he cautioned against practices spending considerable sums of money installing ventilation equipment as the Scottish Government was considering introducing a "point of care" testing system as alternative way of increasing treatment levels. There is also the prospect of Covid vaccinations being available in the foreseeable future. However, ventilation will still be required for health and safety reasons, and for practice inspections. Many dentists are already considering how to increase ventilation with their practices to allow them to treat more patients, therefore clear central guidance is required.

The problem facing practices seeking to reduce fallow times is twofold. Based on a recent survey, a majority of practices in Scotland simply do not hold data on their air change levels. Meanwhile, most practices also lack the means to invest in the ventilation equipment required to expand capacity. A typical high street practice therefore faces not only a steep bill for ventilation surveys to establish compliance, but also for the cost of equipment and other works, which on the basis of industry advice is estimated to start at £10,000.

In recent years the Scottish Government has offered welcome capital funding of £7 million for decontamination units in dental practices. This investment in the future-proofing of our infrastructure made a genuine difference to the level of care dentists were able to offer. These unprecedented times require a similar statement of support: we desperately need funding both to establish the levels of need in terms of ACH levels, and to get the systems in place to enable a transformative effect on capacity.

An increase in patient throughput would also begin to increase Scottish Government revenue via patient contributions, to the point where we believe that Government capital investment in ventilation would more than pay for itself.

Covid-19 restrictions on patient throughput, set by Government, are placing significant limits on the number of patients we can treat for the foreseeable future. Your support could help bring hundreds of thousands of patients back through our doors to get the care they need.

Colleagues in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have also raised this matter directly with their relevant administrations. I look forward to hearing from you soon and would be happy to discuss these issues with you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a final horizontal stroke at the bottom.

David McColl
Chair, Scottish Dental Practice Committee
British Dental Association