

Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department for Health and Social Care
Sent by email

9th March 2025

Dear Wes,

In October 2023 the Labour Party first promised to deliver 700,000 urgent NHS dental appointments.

We welcome the fact that commissioning has begun, but we note your officials have discovered unmet need for urgent dentistry of as many as 2.2 million patients, and have not set out any plans for the ongoing care for the 700,000 they do aim to deliver urgent appointments for.

Ministers have rightly labelled the state of dentistry in this country as 'Dickensian'. If we stand any chance of consigning 'DIY' dentistry back to the Victorian era we need a solution for all of these patients.

During COVID, the approach taken by the last Government restricted access to face-to-face dentistry. Antibiotics became a cure-all to desperate patients with toothache. People with toothache require an operative intervention, but they got prescriptions instead. But these policies exposed patients to unacceptable and preventable risks of dangerous complications such as anaphylaxis and C diff, and the development of antibiotic-resistant infections which can be life-threatening due to sepsis.

Figures show that not only was dentistry the only NHS setting to increase antibiotic prescribing, but the chances of people ending up with antibiotics from a dentist increased almost ten-fold during lockdown. And the latest research from the University of Manchester shows that we still aren't back to where we would have been if COVID hadn't happened.

Even before COVID, 'normal' was excessive, because under the UDA system dentists simply are not given the time to care for patients requiring urgent treatment.

Research also shows that there has been widespread frustration among dentists who know that procedures rather than prescriptions are generally the safest and quickest fix for toothache. Careful diagnosis is required to be able to tell what's causing an urgent dental problem and whether antibiotics are necessary for treatment. Specialist skills and equipment are needed for this, and it is why GPs and pharmacists are advised not to treat dental problems. Antibiotic only treatment plans are rarely appropriate.

Clearly antibiotics do not cure toothache, but they do fuel antibiotic resistance. Ensuring meaningful access for all to face-to-face urgent dental appointments gives people with toothache the dignity they deserve to alleviate their pain while keeping them safe from this existential threat to human health.

Last month's announcement must be the beginning, not the end of this Government's interest in urgent care. We hope you do not lose sight of the fact that the huge unmet need that we see for urgent dental care is indicative of the failure of the system we work under, and measures you just announced only temporarily address the problems created by our flawed contract. The only way to reduce this need – and avoidable antibiotic prescribing in dentistry – is to move at pace to reform the failed contract fuelling the crisis in this service.

Yours sincerely,



Eddie Crouch
Chair
British Dental Association



Shiv Pabary
Chair
General Dental Practice Committee