

Dentist Mystery Shop November 2020

Access to emergency care and registration options during Covid-19

Introduction

In February 2019, HWN conducted a research to evaluate all 29 dental practices across Newham after receiving feedbacks from residents who were finding it difficult to secure an appointment. From the research, it was highlighted that whilst 86% of practices were taking new patients, 45% of dental practices contracted to provide NHS routine appointment had a waiting time of 4 weeks to 3 months. Around 50% of practices were not able to provide urgent or emergency treatments to patients.

A further research was conducted between August and September 2019 to assess the quality of services patients received once an appointment was obtained. This revealed 100% of patients were satisfied with their dental practice and 84% of patients felt involved in the decision making of their dental care. This research also highlighted that emergency appointments were provide for registered patients, as practices refused emergency appointments for walk-in patients due to capacity.

During the March 2020 lockdown, all dental practices in England suspended routine appointments and practices needed to prioritise patients with the most urgent need. Dental practices remained accessible for patients who needed advice and were referred to the Urgent Dental Care (UDC) Hubs, set up during the first lockdown for emergency treatments.

From 8 June, it was announced that practices could re-open if they had PPE, could maintain social distancing, and could implement necessary infection prevention control (British Dental Association, 2020)¹. However, as these measures reduced dentists' appointments capacity, the Urgent Dental Care (UDC) hubs remained operational to provide access to urgent care.

Currently emergency cases should be a priority for dental practices and those who need a routine appointment, would still need to wait even if they are trying to access the emergency hub. To access emergency hubs, patients would still need to call NHS 111 and go through triage over the phone to be assessed to see if they meet the criteria for an appointment.

Over the past few months, Healthwatch Newham received several feedbacks from patients who had experienced some difficulty booking emergency NHS dental appointments, some dental practices refusing to see patients, or register new NHS patients. Accessing dental care has been very challenging for patients across the country, as a report from [HWE](#) suggests people had some difficulty booking emergency dental appointment.

Objectives:

For these reasons, a mystery shopping exercise was conducted in November 2020, with all 29 dental practices in Newham, to understand whether patients could secure an NHS emergency appointment and whether practices are registering new NHS patients.

¹ British Dental Association (2020) *Coronavirus and Dentistry*. Available at: <https://bda.org/advice/coronavirus/pages/latest-update.aspx>

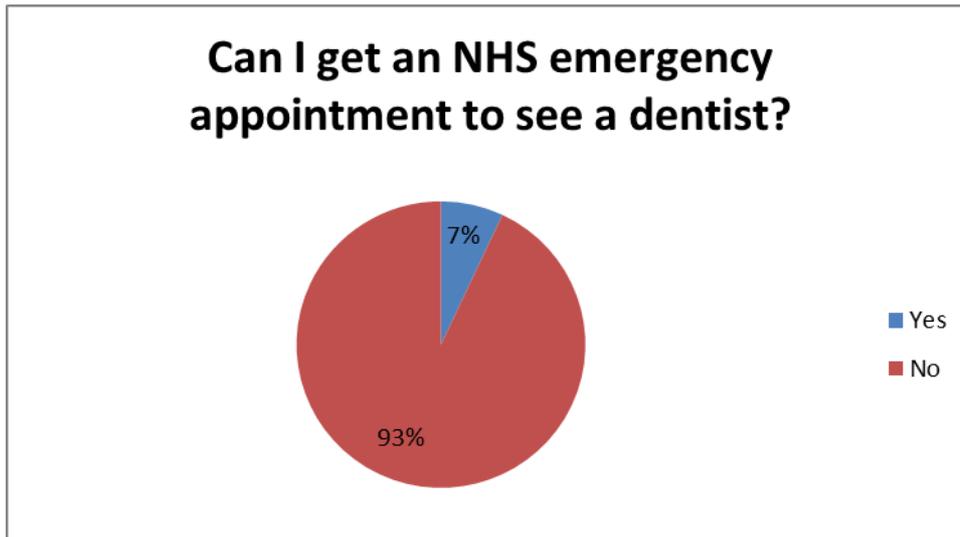
Methodology

Healthwatch Newham staff and volunteers contacted all 29 dental practices as a mystery caller, presenting an emergency situation, using a semi-structured script to gather feedback.

Out of 29 practices, one only provided orthodontic treatments, and a second could not be reached. Feedback was gathered from the remaining 27 practices, before and during the second lockdown.

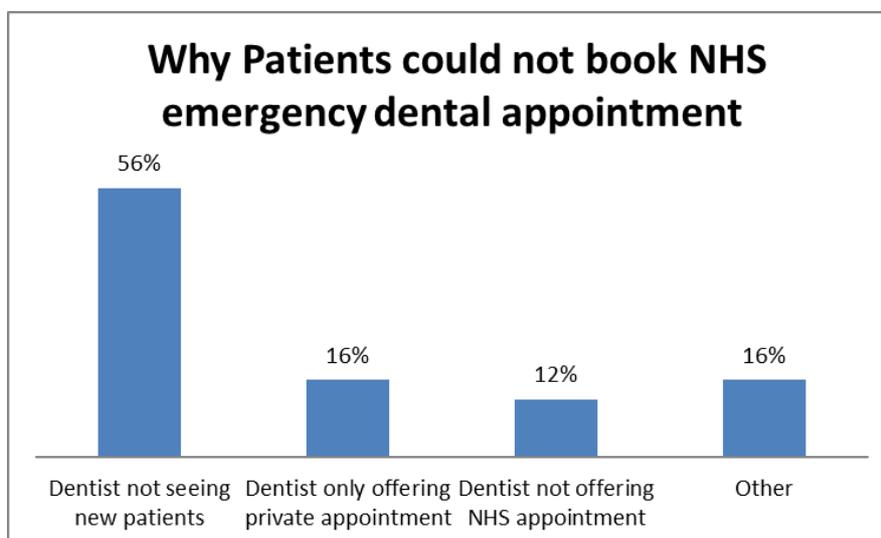
Findings

Emergency appointment



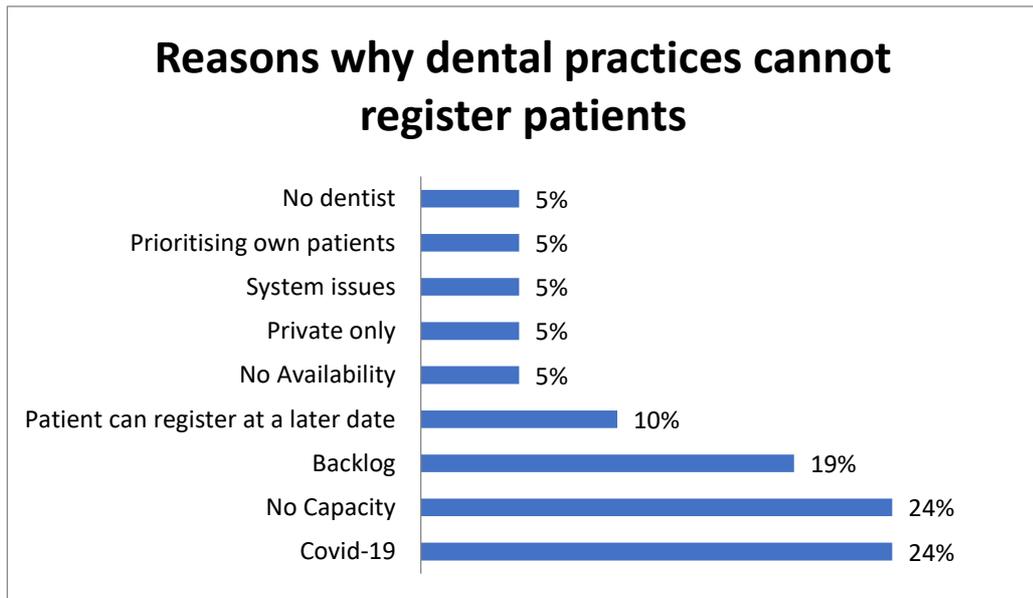
When the caller asked for an NHS emergency appointment as a non-registered patient:

- 25 practices (93%) were not able to offer an emergency NHS appointment. Of these:
 - 14 (56%) said they were not seeing new patients
 - 3 (12%) were not offering an NHS emergency appointment
 - 4 (16%) of practices said they were only offering private appointments
 - 4 (16%) mentioned other reasons e.g. *"no dentist available"*.
- Only 2 Practices (7%) offered the caller an NHS emergency appointment.



Registration

- 25 practices (93%) said they could not register new patients.
 - 21 practices (78%) said no, the caller could not register as an NHS patient.
 - 4 practices (15%) told the caller they were not taking new patients when the caller enquired about emergency appointment at the beginning of the call.
- 2 practices (7%) agreed the caller could register as an NHS patient.
- Amongst the 21 practices that told caller they could not register as an NHS patient, 5 practices (24%) said because of Covid-19 and other practices mentioned all other reasons. *(See graph below)*



- Mystery callers also asked the receptionist at practices contacted When will they be able to register as an NHS Patient. 14 practices (52%) said they were not sure, 6 practices (22%) asked the caller to try again at a later date. This question was not applicable to the remaining 7 Practices (26%) because some practices already agreed the caller could register, or said no, to registration and asked caller to call 111.

Alternative emergency appointment

- 20 practices (74%) suggested the caller should contact NHS 111 for where to go for an emergency appointment and 1 practice (4%) suggested to contact another practice as an alternative for emergency appointment.
- 6 practices (22%) did not suggest any alternatives to the caller on where they could go for an emergency appointment.

Patient feedback:

In November 2020 we received the following feedback from some residents in Newham:

“I have a 5 year old son and he has a lot of tooth pain. I have called many dental practices in Newham, but none would accept to register him, only for private appointments. I called NHS 111 and they gave me an emergency appointment at one of the dental hubs in Newham. The doctor advised on antibiotics to alleviate the pain for now, but it does not fix the issue he has. They say they can only offer the proper treatment if I have a dentist refer me to them or if I pay the private price. I don't know what to do”.

“I’m trying to find a dentist to register with but am really struggling. Every dentist I have rang has said they are not talking on new patients”.

Conclusions

Although dental practices were supposed to be seeing patients and offering some appointments, most practices we contacted were unable to offer an emergency appointment to patients.

- From the findings of our research, we gathered that 93% of dental practices in Newham have limited NHS emergency appointment capacity and are not seeing new walk-in patients, of which only 16% offered a private emergency appointment due to pressures on their services.
- Access to the Urgent Dental Care (UDC) also appears to be limited and difficult for some patients who require emergency appointments.
- 17% of dentists were offering private emergency appointments only.
- 93% of dental practices said they could not register NHS patients, either, because of Covid-19, backlog, or lack of capacity and resources.
- For alternative emergency appointments, 74% of practices suggested patients should contact NHS 111.
- These issues are exacerbated by the transient population in Newham.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need in Newham to review the allocation of NHS emergency appointments, access to Urgent Dental Care hub services and improving capacity to allow for new patients to register.

About Healthwatch

Healthwatch Newham is part of a national network led by Healthwatch England, which was established through the Health and Social Care Act in 2012, to give service users of health and social care services a powerful voice both locally and nationally. We are the independent voice for people's views on Newham services, both good and bad. We listen to local people and feedback patient experience and liaise with local commissioners and decision makers, in order to improve services.

For more information on accessing dental services visit:

healthwatchnewham.co.uk/advice-and-information/2020-11-25/your-dental-care-during-covid-19

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