



Staying mindful of mental health

Luke Moore

Mental health issues are receiving increasing attention in the dental profession and in wider society too. Luke Moore, Dental Elite, examines some of the common causes for this in dentistry and explains what can be done to improve mental wellbeing on individual and national levels.



Today, mental health illness is considered to be a prevalent problem within the UK dental profession. While this isn't a new development, it's only in recent years that the enormity of the problem has come to light, due in part to the greater availability of data and understanding of the issue. A heightened awareness and decreased social stigma and embarrassment about mental health has no doubt helped with this too, resulting in more dentists opening up about their own experiences.

As such, we now know that there is a high risk of mental health illness among dentists, which has led to growing concerns about suicide in dentistry. The exact numbers for 2018 are unknown, but in a previous study, the levels of minor psychiatric symptoms were found

to be 32% in general dental practitioners. In comparison, doctors had a prevalence of 27.8%, while the general population was much lower with 17.8%¹. As for suicide, it is well documented that there is a link between suicide and mental disorders, though data released by the Office for National Statistics suggests that occurrence is much lower among male dentists compared to low-skilled workers. For female health professionals, on the other hand, the risk is shown to be much higher, so the profession should bear this in mind moving forward².

According to a report released by the British Dental Association in 2017, the main types of mental health issues in dentistry are stress, burnout, anxiety and depression. Less commonly reported were sleeplessness, breakdowns, withdrawal, drug use, panic attacks and alcohol use, amongst others. In the short-term, mental health can have a severe impact on well-being and day-to-day life, leading to loss of motivation, social disengagement and absence from work. Relationships with loved ones can often be affected too, which can lead to separate,

though no less upsetting issues. As for long-term, mental illness could lead to quitting the profession, early retirement, further health complications and, in severe cases, suicide. But what is it about dentistry that is having such a detrimental impact on dentists' mental health and well-being?

What are the causes?

There are a number of factors that can impact mental health, from work conditions and isolation, to regulation and litigation, uncertainty of NHS dentistry, pressure of targets and tight schedules, finances, complaints and more.³ The dental practice can be an unforgiving environment, even for those who are not suffering with mental health issues. When you consider, then, that some or all of these conditions are present in a number of practices up and down the country (in varying degrees, of course), it's a wonder that more dentists aren't more severely affected. These difficulties simply cannot be faced day after day without serious consequences.

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Perhaps that’s why almost 58% of the UK’s NHS dentists are planning to leave NHS dentistry in the next five years⁴. It is no secret that NHS dentistry has become pressurised as a result of the contract system; it is quite possible that this could have an adverse effect on mental health.

Either way, it is clear that more must be done to address this issue. On a national level, attention to remuneration, regulation and contract reform will be key moving forward, but action must also be taken within the dental practice to safeguard mental well-being. Some of the recommended preventive measures that could be taken to minimise mental health illness include:

- Improving the working environment at the practice through effective communication and support
- Regular staff meetings and team building to reduce isolation and encourage communication
- Working sensible hours and taking a lunch break
- Taking annual leave to diffuse tension and stress

It’s also up to the dentist to take proactive steps to look after their mental health. From exercising more and living a healthier lifestyle to advocating positive changes in the practice

that promote well-being, there are ways in which dentists can take mental health into their own hands.

Help is at hand

Of course for anyone suffering from mental health illness, it’s not always easy taking those first steps – but help is at hand. Leading UK charity Mind provides a range of training and well-being courses to help teach individuals and companies how to manage, develop and promote healthy mental health. There are also a number of guidelines and information leaflets available to aid recovery, as well as two confidential helplines and an online community called Elefriends where individuals can go to for support.

Mental health illness is likely to be an ongoing issue in dentistry, but with the right support from charities like Mind, dentists can take positive steps in overcoming difficulties. If you or someone you know is suffering from mental health issues, visit www.mind.org.uk.

Luke Moore

Founder and Director, Dental Elite.

If you’d like to support Dental Elite in their endeavours for Mind, visit www.justgiving.com/fundraising/dentalelite – any donation, no matter how large or small, would be greatly appreciated.

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To help the charity to continue improving and saving lives, Dental Elite has pledged to take on a ‘Wish List’ from the Coventry and Warwickshire branch of Mind. Through fundraising, we hope to enable Mind to improve the facilities at the branch and fund specific courses for people in need, whilst also raising awareness amongst the dental profession.

A number of the team are taking part in various events and challenges throughout 2018, including the mighty Wolf Run 10K obstacle course in April, skydiving in May, and the notorious 24-hour Three Peaks Challenge on Thursday 5th July. The agency has also already completed a 10K run around Draycote Waters in Rugby, helping to raise crucial funds for the worthy cause.

1 Myers and Myers (2004). ‘It’s difficult being a dentist’: stress and health in the general dental practitioner. *British Dental Journal*, 197, pp. 89–93. Accessed online February 2018 at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15272347>

2 Office for National Statistics. Suicide by occupation, England: 2011–2015. Accessed online February 2018 at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/suicidebyoccupation/england2011to2015/suicide-by-occupation-among-females>

3 British Dental Association Research Paper. The Mental Health and Well-being of UK Dentists: A Qualitative Study. Published August 2017. Accessed online February 2018 at <https://bda.org/dentists/policy-campaigns/research/workforce-finance/Dentists%20well-being%20and%20work-related%20stress/dmhb/Documents/The%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Well-being%20of%20UK%20Dentists%20A%20Qualitative%20Study%20Final.pdf>

4 British Dental Association. ‘Half of NHS young dentists heading for the exit’. Published 1 October 2017. Accessed online February 2018 at <https://bda.org/news-centre/press-releases/half-of-nhs-young-dentists-heading-for-the-exit>