

Determining the optimal model for role substitution in NHS dental services in the UK: a mixed-methods study

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Improving productivity in the NHS is a key consideration for policy-makers and is becoming increasingly important, given budgetary pressures on public expenditure. Across England, approximately half of the patients who attend for a regular NHS dental check-up do not require any further treatment, whereas half of the population does not regularly attend the dentist. In other words, the most expensive resource (the dentist) is seeing healthy patients at a time when many of those with the most dental health problems do not access care. One way to address this issue is to improve the productivity of the dental team. Role substitution, when non-dentist members of the dental team take on tasks previously limited to dentists, has the potential to do this. The aims of this study were to examine how productive dental teams are that make use of non-dentists and to explore the barriers to, and enablers of, change.

A multimethod approach was adopted using questionnaires, health-economic models specifically designed to measure productivity and interviews with dentists, their teams and patients. The extent of role substitution in NHS dentistry was limited; the most common non-dentist team member was the dental hygienist. As the number of non-dentist team members increased, the productivity of the NHS practice dropped. Financial incentives played a major role in this, but the views of practice principals were also important. Patients had a low level of awareness of the different roles of the dental team, but many had been seen and were happy to be treated by non-dentists.

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