

Impact of changing provider remuneration on NHS general dental practitioner services in Northern Ireland: a mixed-methods study

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Plain English summary

NHS general dental services provider remuneration

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Plain English summary

The way dentists are paid can affect the amount and type of treatment they provide for their patients. Eleven practices were initially paid for each item of NHS treatment they provided (called fee for service); they then changed to a capitation-based system for 1 year, during which they were paid a monthly fee based on the number of patients registered with them. They then changed back to the fee-for-service system. These practices were compared with 18 practices that were always paid on a fee-for-service basis. We looked at how these changes affected access to care, the type and amount of treatment provided and the costs of the service. We also interviewed dentists and patients to get their views on the change.

Rapid changes happened when dentists were paid differently. A small increase in the number of patients registered was seen under the capitation system, but the provision of all types of treatment (e.g. fillings, crowns) fell sharply. This fall in treatment caused a large fall in the NHS fees collected from patients. After returning to the fee-for-service system, everything quickly reverted to how things were before the capitation system started. Patients noticed little difference during the changes.

Dentists varied a lot in how they reacted to the change. Local factors, such as relationships with their patients, their local community and fellow dentists, contributed to the differences in behaviour.

This project shows that dentists rapidly change the way they treat patients depending on how they are paid. The NHS wants to design a new dental contract to increase prevention and improve quality, while controlling costs and securing access. Changing the way dentists are paid on its own is unlikely to achieve these goals and additional features may need to be included in a new NHS dental contract.

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