

Dental therapists compared with general dental practitioners for undertaking check-ups in low-risk patients: pilot RCT with realist evaluation

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Plain English summary

Dentists vs. dental therapists for low-risk check-ups

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Plain English summary

As the oral health of regular dental attenders improves further, it is likely that an increasing number of these patients will be low risk and will require only a simple check-up in the future, with no further treatment. As a result, the use of dentists to undertake routine dental check-ups is a potentially costly way of providing care for those patients who are at low risk of future disease. We undertook a 15-month pilot randomised controlled trial to determine whether or not dental therapists could manage low-risk regular dental attenders in NHS dental practices instead of dentists. This trial involved eight dental practices and 217 patients. We found no difference in the care provided by dental therapists and dentists, and no differences in oral health after 15 months.

In parallel, we undertook interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including dental commissioners, dentists, dental therapists and patients. We found a number of important barriers to role substitution in NHS dentistry. These mainly related to contractual and regulatory issues in the NHS, which act as barriers to the greater use of dental therapists.

We collected cost data and analysed these to establish the value to society. We found that the use of dental therapists to manage low-risk regular dental attenders appears to be feasible. We also explored how care is currently provided and the outcomes of care that would be most important to patients.

A number of challenges and design issues for a definitive trial were identified. Many relate to the low-risk status of the population group and the relative good oral health of many patients attending NHS practices, making the detection of differences difficult. Alternative research designs may be more appropriate.

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