

Mental health: Workplace related stress claims signal a profession under pressure

Isabel Johnston looks at the landscape of mental health in the dental profession

Mental health has long been in the spotlight. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly two-thirds of UK adults reported having experienced a mental health problem.¹ As a profession, the psychosocial working conditions of both community dentists and general dental practitioners (GDPs) place them at higher risk of occupational stress compared to the wider UK working population.² But what are incapacity statistics showing? And how do we work with the profession to address the problem and support professionals back to work?

Last year MPs on the Health and Social Care Committee referenced burnout in the health and care sectors being on an upward trend.³ From early on in their careers, starting in dental school, dental professionals encounter numerous sources of professional stress, which can have a negative impact on their personal and professional lives.⁴ British Dental Association (BDA) research indicates almost half of dentists stated that stress in their job exceeds their ability to cope.⁵ Work conditions, isolation and professional regulation have been listed as the top three causes of burnout and mental health issues.²

What do the incapacity claims look like?

Claims statistics from income protection provider Dentists' Provident show 16% of claims paid in 2021 were for psychiatric disorders, including conditions such as stress and anxiety.



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Nearly half of these claims (40%) were workplace related stress claims and of these, the majority were from dental professionals aged 50-60. The number was more prevalent in men, with psychiatric disorder claims accounting for 22% of the total claims paid to males. The figure was 10% for women.⁶

'Many have listed the increased work demands and pressures they have faced since the pandemic as a key factor underlying their incapacity', says Paul Roberts, Head of Claims at Dentists' Provident.

During the pandemic, incapacity claims peaked in 2020 with Dentists' Provident

paying out nearly a million pounds more in claims compared with 2019, and psychiatric disorders being one of the significant sources of claims.

These figures are supported by several studies showing the pandemic increasing stress levels in dental teams, with working conditions having directly impacted the mental health of many dentists. Many cite PPE, patient backlog and a rise in administrative tasks leading both to a decrease in breaks in practice and increased pressures.⁷

According to the World Health Organisation, workplace burnout is the result

Wellbeing Support for the Dental Team - A UK wide resource: www.supportfordentalteams.org/

of chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.⁸

Tony Helliwell, of the insurance consultancy, THINCS and a qualified mental health nurse, who has worked with the dental profession for more than 20 years, told me: ‘The last couple of years since the pandemic began have notably impacted everyone, especially on the medical side. Many dentists I see have struggled ‘getting back on track’ since their practices went into lockdown. Their environment isn’t only influenced by their own increased anxiety, but also by their patients returning to a ‘new normal.’

Specialist support

Dentists’ Provident works with a team of specialist rehabilitation clinicians such as Tony Helliwell, to support dental professionals claiming for mental health related issues and other conditions.

‘Many professionals I meet have spent years chasing their tails constantly and simply can’t do it anymore. In my role, I work with them to help identify the right treatment path, look at finding them practitioners that can help them get to the root of their problems, so they feel in a better position to make decisions about how to achieve a more positive future’, says Tony.

Addressing key burnout drivers

BDA research supports that occupational stress is a key driver of burnout and mental ill health. Their own investigations show that levels of burnout were highest amongst dentists with greater NHS commitments.⁹

In 2020 the Association announced their work to help develop effective prevention strategies, alongside properly signposted, integrated services to support dentists’ wellbeing and mental health.

At the time, BDA President Roz McMullen said: ‘Our focus is on prevention – we’ve helped secure support for dentists, but very little is joined up. Too many dentists don’t seem to be aware of what help they can access or have the knowledge to spot the tell-tale signs of stress in themselves, their colleagues and their patients.

‘We want to ensure skilled and experienced clinicians have a sustainable career path, and that we nurture the talent of the next generation of dentists and support them to stay in the service.’¹⁰

Impact of ongoing pressures

Last year the General Dental Council commissioned an evidence assessment,

recognising the increasing mental health and wellbeing challenges faced by its registrants. The assessment found that dentists suffer an increased level of stress and burnout, particularly general dental practitioners. Some studies in the assessment suggested that poor mental health may lead to practitioners being less clinically confident and potentially impact treatment decisions.

The GDC commissioned assessment points towards the importance of better understanding and response to mental health issues. The hope is the review’s developing evidence base will inform how the dental sector responds to prevent and address professionals’ mental health issues at every stage in their career – from education, through into the workplace and through continuing professional development.¹¹

Working together for the profession

With discussions about mental health becoming destigmatised, the momentum is there to continue to raise awareness, better understand the challenges the dental profession faces, and start looking at changes that are urgently needed to address creating a better working environment for the future.

While everyone has individual responsibilities, there are lots of different factors that need to work collaboratively to enhance wellbeing for dental professionals. It is more important than ever for the industry that those in positions of leadership work together to provide training opportunities on resilience and coping strategies, alongside a need for multi-level action to address system weaknesses. Providing policymakers, employers, workforce planners and educators with the challenge to better understand a new generation of dentists and to adjust the dental health system accordingly, in order to offer working conditions that provide flexibility and enhance work/life balance with clearer progression pathways and a healthier practice environment – for now and in the future.¹² ♦

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