

North Devon Conservatives

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Loss of access to NHS Dentistry under Labour “unacceptable”: Philip Milton

A CAMPAIGNER has condemned as “unacceptable” the significant decrease in patients across the South West seen by an NHS dentist since 2006.

New statistics published by the NHS Information Centre indicate that since the Government’s introduction of a new dental contract in April 2006:

- More than 1.2 million people have lost access to NHS dentistry – a rate equivalent to over 50,000 patients each month
- In the South West there has been a decrease of 2.2% (from March 2006 to June 2008) of patients seen by an NHS dentist
- Nearly 5 per cent fewer adults were seen by an NHS dentist • Over 200,000 fewer children were seen
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In two previous separate sessions of Health Oral Questions, Alan Johnson, answering questions put by Mike Penning MP, Shadow Front Bench Minister for Health, has insisted that access to NHS Dentistry is ‘getting better all the time.’

Responding to the publication of the figures, Philip Milton, Conservative Prospective MP for North Devon said: “This is simply unacceptable. Patients have now had to endure more than two years of a failed dental contract, and because of Labour’s complacency, access is still continuing to decline.

“More than 1,200,000 people have directly suffered due to the Government’s botched reforms.

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“Rather than persisting with such a ludicrous approach, Ministers must instead focus on patient care in order to make warm words a reality.”

ENDS

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Notes to editors

1) NHS Information Centre Figures

The NHS Information Centre published today the NHS Dental Statistics for England, Q1, 2008-9. These were scheduled to be published on 20th November, but were delayed owing to 'technical reasons.' The majority of the figures compare the 24 month period ending 30 June 2008 (which is entirely within the operation of the new dental contract, launched April 2006) with the 24 months to 31 March 2006.

1,210,052 people have lost access to NHS dentistry within this period

<http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/primary-care/dentistry/nhs-dental-statistics-q1-2008-09>

2) Misleading Government pledges

- Blair promises NHS dentists for all. In his speech to the Labour Party conference of 28 September 1999, Tony Blair said that everyone would have access to an NHS dentist within two years (Tony Blair, Speech at Labour Party Conference, 28 September 1999).

- Health Secretary refuses to acknowledge existing problems. In two separate sessions of Health Oral Questions, Alan Johnson, answering questions put by Mike Penning, has insisted that access to NHS Dentistry is 'getting better all the time.' (Official Report, 5 February 2008; Vol. 471, c. 772; 17 Jun 2008: c. 800)

3) Patient experiences of local access to dentistry under the new dental contract

The Healthcare Commission's 2008 survey of patients' experiences of local health services (published 31 July 2008) made clear that half of the respondents reported that they had visited a dentist as an NHS patient at least once in the last two years. Of all those who do not currently visit a dentist as an NHS patient, over three quarters (79%) said that they would like to be able to do so.

4) Select Committee Report makes clear negative outcomes from Labour's change to the dental contract (House of Commons Health Committee, Dental Services, Fifth Report of Session 2007-8, vol. 1, HC 289-I)

- Fall in preventative advice. 'We received no evidence from the Department that the amount of preventative advice given by dentists had increased since April 2006. However, a survey conducted in 2007 by the London

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Assembly found that only 69% of NHS dental patients had received preventative advice when they last visited their dentist. The corresponding figure for private dental patients was 86%.' (pp. 30-1).

- Reduction in the number of complex treatments carried out. 'There are concerns that since 2006, as a result of the contract, some patients who require complex dental treatment are not receiving it. The volume of more complex dental treatment administered by dentists within band three (requiring laboratory work such as crowns, bridges and dentures) has fallen sharply since 2006 ... Before 2006, 8% of all treatments were what are now termed band three treatments. Since 2006, the figure is 4%.' (p. 32).
- Issue of patient access. 'The Department initially stated that the key test of its reforms would "be their ability to support improved patient access." Many witnesses claimed that access problems remained severe ... During our enquiry the Department's emphasis changed. Rather than improving access, the CDO claimed that the reforms introduced in April 2006 had not made things worse'. (p. 19).

5) Commenting at the time of release, Shadow Health Minister, Mike Penning, said: 'The Government has consistently refused to acknowledge the shambolic current state of NHS dentistry. I therefore welcome this report, which gives a scathing assessment of the true scale of the problems.

'Labour must take responsibility for the failure of their dental contract. It has vastly reduced the number of people able to gain access to an NHS dentist. The situation is simply unacceptable, as the Select Committee has now made clear.

'In line with Conservative proposals, the report calls for a return to a registration system and an increase in the range of UDA banding. This will help to shift the focus back to preventative treatment and to secure better outcomes for patients.

'The Select Committee's findings are compelling evidence of the reasons why dentists are leaving the NHS in droves. We believe that this failed experiment with the UDA-based contract must be scrapped.' (Conservative Press Release, Penning: Report highlights failure of NHS Dentistry under Labour).

6) Further problems with NHS Dentistry

- 7.4 million with no NHS dentist. A recent study for the Citizens Advice Bureau found that 7.4 million people have not been to an NHS dentist since April 2006 because of difficulties in finding one (16 January 2008).
- £62 million dental charges hike. Last year, after the Government's new system of dental charges was introduced, NHS patients paid £62 million (15 per cent) more, even though fewer people saw a dentist (Department of Health, Evidence to the 2008 Pay Review body for Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration, 5 November 2007; NHS Information Centre). The Government had previously promised: 'It [the new charging system] will not increase the proportion of revenue raised from patients' charges' (Lord Warner, Minister of State, Department of Health, Lords Hansard, 7 July 2005, Column WS27).
- Number of NHS dentists declining. The Department of Health has admitted that the number of NHS dentists declined by 500 last year (Department of Health, Evidence to the 2008 Pay Review body for Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration, 5 November 2007).

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