

Manpower crisis

The shortage of NHS dentists is set to become considerably worse during the next decade, according to a health department review of the primary care dental workforce.

The review, the first since 1987, predicts that staff shortages will probably increase threefold by 2011, up from 1,850 last year to more than 5,000 by 2011. If the trends continue, the NHS in England could be short of 6,484 dentists by 2021.

During the next 10 years the number of professionals complementary to dentistry who will be taking on some of the duties currently undertaken by dentists, are predicted to increase. The number of practising dental therapists is projected to rise by 870 and the number of practising hygienists by 330.

It is estimated that a dental therapist can increase a dentist's output by 46 per cent and a hygienist by 33 per cent.

Demand for adult treatment hours is expected to grow by only

five to seven per cent by 2011 and even less (up to 0.1 per cent) from 2011 –21 while demand for the treatment of children is predicted to remain broadly unchanged during the next 20 years.

The health department says it currently does not have sufficient data to make meaningful projections for dental nurses and technicians - this is a task that future workforce planning will need to address.

The review calculates the anticipated supply and demand for dental services from population projections and dental registration data. But it says these figures can only provide a 'best estimate' of manpower need because it is not yet known what the impact on the workforce will be of the introduction of the new contract and of PCDs working in extended roles.

Several factors will impact in the coming years on the numbers of dentists working in the UK. These include the effect of more women graduates joining the workforce, both men and women changing

their working patterns, dentists working less hours for the NHS (often as a result of switching to private dentistry) and dentists doing less clinical work because of the need to spend more time on issues like clinical governance, cross-infection control and CPD. Another factor affecting the workforce will be the more demanding requirements for the registration of dentists from the 'Old Commonwealth'.

The British Dental Association said there was no doubt that the supply of dentists had reached crisis point.

'This long overdue report underlines the severity of the situation and shows that the gap between patient need and the number of dentists required is set to get even worse,' said John Renshaw, chair of the BDA's Executive Board. ■

Report of the primary care dental workforce review can be downloaded from www.dh.gov.uk/publications