



Ceann Seirbhíse, Cúraim Príomhúil
Cúram Sláinte Pobail Cabhán Dún na nGall
Liatroim Muineachán, Sligeach
An Clochar, Sráid an Choláiste, Béal Átha
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24th July, 2024

Deputy Niamh Smyth, T.D
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House,
Kildare Street,
Dublin

Re: PQ 32181 24 - To ask the Minister for Health if the national school dental service has ceased in counties Cavan and Monaghan; how children left untreated can access these services; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Smyth

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context enquiry regarding the above parliamentary question, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response.

I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position for Community Healthcare Cavan Donegal Leitrim Monaghan Sligo.

The HSE Dental Services has traditionally operated as a targeted, school-linked service, whereby children in specific primary school classes are targeted for an oral health assessment and for primary care treatment arising there from. Children are eligible for oral health care up to the eve of their 16th birthday. The provision of this service is a statutory requirement for the HSE but the number of children and cohorts examined are dependent on the available resources at any given time. Children who are examined in sixth class are referred to the HSE Orthodontic Service if eligible for publicly funded orthodontic treatment. Whilst at present this school dental service has not ceased it is severely curtailed. As of last year only children in 6th class were being targeted for oral health assessments and in Monaghan to date only 50% of 6th class 2022/2023 (current 1st years) have been offered appointments.

The reasons for this reduction in service to children attending primary schools is as follows:
HSE Dental Services also provide care for and have increasing demands from:

- Adults with special needs
- Children with special Needs
- Emergency treatment for medical card holders unable to access DTSS contracted dentists
- Ukrainian patients
- Patients under International Protection

Due to staff retirements, maternity leaves (last year there were 3 Dental Surgeons on maternity leave, currently there is 1 Dentist on maternity and 1 is due to go on maternity leave in the coming months) and the paucity of dentists available nationally, the HSE Dental Services in Cavan Monaghan have operated with a significant shortfall of WTE for several years. This has resulted in an inevitable delay in progress through target classes, resulting in a significant unmet



treatment need and therefore an increase in children presenting as emergencies. Anecdotally we know that post Covid tooth decay in children has reached significant levels particularly in vulnerable groups, with any recent gains expected to be undone by ongoing access problems and disruption to public health programmes. Lack of dental examinations will also result in little or no referrals to the HSE Orthodontic Services.

The demand for treatment by special care patients and parents of children with special care needs continues to grow and access is again limited by a lack of dental surgeons. Dental infection is one of the leading causes internationally of paediatric admission to hospital and due to lack of routine dental services the unmet treatment need increase the chance of hospital admission for acute dental infection for children and special care patients.

The demand for emergency care by adult patients has continued to increase rapidly as the majority of medical card patients are not able to access care under the public system due to the mass exodus of private dentists from the Dental Treatment Services Scheme. A large influx of Ukrainian patients and patients under international protection, many of whom have complex treatment needs are presenting as emergencies and care is being provided at HSE Dental Clinics. Due to the need for interpreter facilities and in order to meet the differing cultural expectations these appointments take significantly more time and incur additional costs.

As much as is possible contingency plans have been put in place. Dental Staff are routinely redeployed across the two counties and provide cross cover for some degree of an emergency service to patients. Prior to the recruitment embargo several development posts had been approved for the service but it is likely they will now not proceed. General Dental Surgeon panels formed following interviews prior to the embargo are now proving to be defunct as those candidates have all taken positions in private practice as they could not continue to wait indefinitely for the embargo to be lifted. This was very unfortunate as dentists are in short supply nationally and are in high demand.

The Dental Service will work to the resources available but currently they are limited and especially over the summer months in the main an emergency only service will be provided where children and special care adults with pain, infection and dental trauma will be prioritised.

I trust that this is of assistance, but please do not hesitate to contact me if you require anything further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Emma Ball'.

Emma Ball
Acting Head of Service
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