

COVID-19 Update

November 2020



ISDH

Irish Society for
Disability & Oral Health

Coronavirus COVID-19

COVID-19 pandemic and access to dental care for vulnerable people in Ireland

The Irish Society for Disability and Oral Health believe that a lack of access to emergency, preventive and routine care, including access to general anaesthesia, in public and private dental services is leading to a build-up of disease burden, health inequality and unacceptable services for the most vulnerable in Ireland. Dentistry is essential frontline care and needs re-establishment immediately throughout the country. The issues identified in this document are in addition and complimentary to the five Smile agus Slainte implementation priorities set out by the ISDH in 2019.

Barrier: Many vulnerable people cannot access public emergency, preventive and routine dental care

The Public Dental Services are staffed and designed to deliver care to vulnerable groups. Up to 40% of HSE public dental service staff have been redeployed during the COVID 19 pandemic*. While this redeployment has been essential, the ongoing lack of access to familiar and highly skilled dental care teams meant that vulnerable people have gone without access to emergency, routine and preventive dental care.

* Irish Dental Association survey Sep 2020

Solution: Special Care Dental teams should be prioritised to deliver oral care to their patients. The care that these teams deliver should be prioritised by health service managers and policy makers.

Action is needed to return Special Care Dental teams to deliver emergency dental care with immediate effect and to review the geographical disparities that are present across different public health services.

1

Barrier:

Many vulnerable people cannot access general dental practices

Many vulnerable people receive dental care under the Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) which is provided by general dentists signed up to the scheme. The COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted the inherent flaws of this scheme which has resulted in nearly 300 dentists leaving the DTSS since March 2020**. This reduced access will impact vulnerable patients most harshly.

** HSE PCRS.ie list of dentists with GMS contracts

Solution:

Policy makers must incentivise general dentists to maintain or take up DTSS contracts.

The DTSS contract should consider case complexity to ensure priority care for vulnerable people.

2

Barrier:

Many vulnerable people cannot access Dental General Anaesthesia

General anaesthesia is essential for many vulnerable people to receive treatment of oral pain and infection. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that many theatre slots traditionally used to provide dental treatment were temporarily closed. We believe that despite the reinstatement of primary care services in recent months, many dental general anaesthesia services have not yet reopened or have only now just opened. Where sessions have been made available, it is often done in a limited manner.

Solution:

The ISDH believe that the Public Dental Service must increase capacity for Dental General Anaesthesia beyond previous levels, as a priority by engaging with all stakeholders including the National Oral Health Office, primary care and hospital management teams.

Service managers and providers must overcome barriers in admission and availability to ensure that vulnerable people can receive dental treatment. E.g. The new barrier of COVID-19 testing prior to GA.

3