

Out of Hours Arrangements for Dentistry from April 2006

This briefing outlines arrangements for PCT residents with dental problems outside of normal surgery hours which came into effect on 1st April 2006.

The introduction of the new dental contract on 1st April 2006 meant that dentists are no longer obliged to provide treatment outside normal surgery hours for their patients, if patients have a dental problem that needs urgent attention. From 1st April 2006 PCTs became responsible for ensuring that an appropriate out-of-hours service (OOH) is provided in their area.

Guidance from the Department of Health clarifies emergency, urgent and non-urgent conditions:

- **Dental emergency classification**
Patients who require emergency care are those requiring immediate attention in order to minimise the risk of serious medical complications or prevent long-term dental complications. Their condition means they are most likely to present at Accident & Emergency departments with:
 - Uncontrollable dental haemorrhage following extractions
 - Rapidly increasing swelling around the throat or eye
 - Trauma confined to the dental arches

- **Dental urgent classification**
Patients who require urgent care are those requiring attention for:
 - Severe dental and facial pain not controlled by over-the-counter preparations
 - Dental and soft tissue acute infection

- **Non-urgent dental conditions**
A number of individuals do access care from OOH services who are not in pain and present for treatment regarding non-urgent problems. This may include:
 - Patients not in pain
 - Aesthetic problems (dislodged crowns and bridges)
 - Patients with broken dentures
 - Patients with hospital referral letters
 - Patients requiring permanent restorations
 - Non traumatic problems with orthodontic appliances
 - Patients who have no significant pathology
 - Patients requiring a second opinion
 - Patients using Emergency Dental Services as their regular dentist
 - Patients requiring surgical extractions (wisdom teeth) and are not in pain

PCTs are required to ensure that services are aimed at those individuals with urgent dental need, who require advice and or treatment and are unable to wait until the next available in-hour service.

There are a number of national key principles to which PCTs should adhere. These include the need to ensure that:

- A form of triage is in place for individuals requiring access to dental OOH services. The form of triage is at the discretion of PCTs.
- Patients should have access to advice (not necessarily on a face-to-face basis).
- Patients should have access to clinical treatment OOHs, when necessary.

It should be noted that:

- Genuine dental emergencies are rare
- Dental OOH advice can be provided to a population across a large geographical area through telephone triage and a dentist on call with access to dental facilities
- Dental OOH services should not be seen as a substitute for provision of urgent dental care available in core working hours.

Following discussions with the Local Dental Committee, the Strategic Health Authority and NHS Direct, the four former PCTs in South Staffordshire commissioned NHS Direct as the provider of call handling services for patients with dental problems outside of normal surgery hours. PCT residents can contact NHS Direct 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on dental problems and dental services. The attached flow chart summarises the processes that NHS Direct uses in handling calls.

Patients attending practices are advised to call NHS Direct on **0845 46 47** if they have a problem outside of normal surgery hours. They are put through to a NHS Direct call handler who will ask some basic questions to ascertain the degree of urgency of the caller's problem. This will allow the caller to be assessed as belonging to one of three categories:

- i. Those requiring assessment as an emergency will be referred either to the nearest Accident and Emergency department, or if appropriate to the nearest dental service available to them. For example, a patient with a bleeding tooth socket would normally be advised to return to the surgery where the tooth was extracted if it is open, whereas a patient with uncontrolled bleeding or severe swelling outside normal surgery hours might be advised to attend A&E.
- ii. Those with urgent and non-urgent conditions are advised to attend the next available surgery appointment available to them. The PCT provides Dental Access Centre services at Stafford, Cannock, Uttoxeter, Burton and Tamworth to treat patients with urgent and some non-urgent conditions who cannot obtain the services of a general dental practitioner. Evening and weekend sessions are available for those with urgent conditions. If a caller has a regular dentist who they would normally expect to see them for advice and care, they will be advised to contact them in the first instance if appropriate to their clinical condition and the time of their call. Those making routine enquiries about dental services, for instance how to access routine NHS dental care, are advised accordingly.
- iii. A small number of callers may not obviously fall into one of the above categories. These callers will be offered more detailed triage and advice from a