

Mr D O'Carolan BDS MFGDP(UK) DPDS MBA
Acting Chief Dental Officer



Department of
**Health, Social Services
and Public Safety**

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AN ROINN

**Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta
agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

MÄNNYSTRIE O

**Poustie, Resydènter Heisin
an Fowk Siccar**

Chief Executives of HSC Trusts

Dental Directors of the Community Dental Service
HSC Trusts

Dental Directors Health & Social Services Boards

Tel:

Fax:

Email:

donncha.o'carolan@dhsspsni.gov.uk

Your Ref:

Our Ref:

Date: 4 March 2008

Dear Colleague,

RE: SCHOOL DENTAL SCREENING

Please find attached a statement on the future policy on dental screening (inspections) in schools. In summary the DHSSPS is advising that the current programme of school dental screening ceases once the screenings for the 2007/08 school year have been completed. Trusts are asked to redeploy the resources used on screening into the priority business areas outlined in the Community Dental Service corporate plan, issued by the DHSSPS in September 2006.

I am happy to discuss further should you require further information.

Yours sincerely

DONNCHA O'CAROLAN

Future Policy On Dental Screening (Inspection) in Schools

Background

Dental screening of school children is a long established function of the Community Dental Service. In more recent years the Department has looked closely at the whole area of school dental screening and has made some important changes:

- In 2002 guidelines were issued for a standardized school dental screening programme across Northern Ireland and this programme was implemented across all Trusts in 2003/04. Children in primary 1, 2 and 7 were screened as part of this programme.
- Data returns from the 2003/04 dental screenings were used to establish the baseline for caries rates in our 5 year old children and data from subsequent years have been used to monitor trends in caries rates and progress against dental targets¹ set out in Priorities for Action (PfA) 2005-2008.
- In 2005 Trusts were advised only to screen primary 1 and primary 2 children attending schools in the 20% most deprived wards as this was the target group for improvement against our PfA. This resulted in the number of children requiring to be screened to drop from 63,000 in 2003/04 to 5000 in 2005/06
- For the school year 2007/08 Trusts are required to screen all primary 1 and primary 2 children in order to establish a new baseline for caries rates in Northern Ireland and measure achievement against the 2008 PfA target.

¹ By 2008, Boards and Trusts should reduce the difference in dental decay levels between 5 year old children in the fifth most deprived wards in each Community Trust area and the Northern Ireland average by 20%. Source: priorities for action 2005-2008 (A Planning Framework for the Health and Personal Social Services) Planned Outcomes and Targets

Effectiveness of School Dental Screening

In the interim important research was undertaken by the University of Manchester on the effectiveness of school dental screening programmes². From the results of this research it was concluded that *'School dental screening has a minimal impact on dental attendance and only a small proportion of screened positive children receive appropriate treatment. The programme fails to reduce inequalities in utilisation of dental services'*.

Following on from the results of this research the National Screening Committee (NSC) recommended to the UK Chief Dental Officers that there is no evidence to support the continued population screening for dental disease among children aged 6-9 years. Moreover, the NSC advise that the resources used on screening are redeployed on interventions which are more effective in reducing inequalities in oral health.

Policy Position

The Department of Health issued guidance³ to Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) in January 2007 notifying them of the NSC's advice and inviting them to reconsider whether it is appropriate for PCTs to continue with dental screening in their area and to consider how best to address inequalities in other ways.

In Northern Ireland the DHSSPS wanted to complete the 2007/2008 school dental screening exercise in order to inform progress against the dental PfA target before making a final decision on the future of the screening programme here.

We have now considered our policy position in relation to the future of school dental screening. Given the findings of the most recent research coupled with the advice from the NSC, and also taking into consideration the impact of positive consent on screening, it has been concluded that the programme of school dental screening does not meet the

² The effectiveness of school dental screening: dental attendance and treatment of those screened positive K. M. Millsom, A. G. Threlfall, A. S. Blinkhorn, P. I. Kearney-Mitchell, K. M. Buchanan and M. Tickle. *BDJ* 2006; 200: 687-690

³ Dental Screening (Inspection) in Schools and Consent for Undertaking Screening and Epidemiological Surveys (Gateway ref. 7698)

Departmental aims of improving the oral health for our population and reducing inequalities⁴ and therefore **should cease** once the screenings for the 2007/08 school year have been completed. Trusts are asked to redeploy the resources used on screening into the other priority business areas outlined in the Community Dental Service corporate plan, issued by the DHSSPS in September 2006.

We would stress that this policy change does not relate to children in special schools who are considered to be a separate group.

Future Data Collection

The DHSSPS plans to continue to collect epidemiological data on the oral health of our population through participation in the adult and child dental health surveys. In addition, we are also considering what other surveys will be necessary to inform the needs assessment of our population.

In concluding we would like to thank the Community Dental Service for their commitment in undertaking dental screening exercises for our young children over the lifetime of the service and particularly for the data returns over the past five years which have helped us in measuring progress against our PfA targets.

Mr Donncha O'Carolan

Acting Chief Dental Officer

February 2008

⁴ The Executive Summary of *The Oral Health Strategy for Northern Ireland*, June 2007 refers