

GENERAL DENTAL SERVICES

POLICY

1. Statutory Requirements

- 1.1 The 1972 Order* requires the Department to provide or secure the provision of health services in Northern Ireland designed to promote the physical and mental health of the community through the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness. This includes the provision of oral health care through the general, community and hospital dental services.
- 1.2 The Order imposes on Health and Social Services Boards (Boards) the obligation to make arrangements with general dental practitioners for the provision of dental treatment and appliances (general dental services) for anyone who requires such services.
- 1.3 The requirements under the Order are implemented by means of the General Dental Services Regulations*. These require a dental practitioner who wishes to provide general dental services to apply to the relevant Board to have his name included in a list of practitioners who are authorised to provide these services. This list is known as 'the Dental List'.

2. Overall Policy Aims

- 2.1 The Department's overall policy aim is to provide the opportunity for each individual in Northern Ireland to attain and maintain an acceptable level of oral health. Acceptable oral health is a level of health of the teeth and other oral structures which allows an individual to:
 - be free of pain and discomfort;
 - eat efficiently;
 - speak clearly;
 - socialise without embarrassment; and
 - be free of life threatening disease.
- 2.2 In support of that aim, the Department ensures the provision of an accessible and effective general dental service which provides dental treatment and appliances to the population. This covers "all proper and necessary dental treatment which a dentist usually undertakes for a patient and which the patient is willing to undergo, including

* Full details of the legislation are given in the Annex

examination, diagnosis, preventive treatment, periodontal treatment, conservation treatment, surgical treatment, the supply and repair of dental appliances, orthodontic treatment and the taking of radiographs and the provision of general anaesthesia and sedation in connection with such treatment and the supply of listed drugs and the issues of prescriptions” in accordance with the relevant legislation. The provision of general anaesthesia will be restricted to hospital from 2001.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

3. General

- 3.1 Within the framework of the legislation the Department, Boards, the Central Services Agency (the Agency) and general dental practitioners have complementary roles in the administration and provision of services. An outline of the roles and responsibilities is provided below.

4. Role of the Department

- 4.1 The Department has responsibility for setting overall policy for the general dental services, legislating for that policy, and providing and allocating resources. It is accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Department’s responsibilities also include monitoring of services in regard to their availability, quality and use of resources. In discharging these responsibilities the Department relies for advice on its Chief Dental Officer and the Central Dental Advisory Committee. Responsibility for the delivery of the service is delegated to Boards.

5. Responsibilities within the Department

Primary Care Directorate

- 5.1 Primary Care Directorate is responsible for determining policy and producing relevant legislation. In conjunction with the Chief Dental Officer it also performs a monitoring role through regular contacts with the Directors of Dental Services of Boards and the Agency and the Dental Practice Committee of the British Dental Association (NI) which represents general dental practitioners.

Finance Directorate

- 5.2 Finance Directorate controls the family health services budget (which includes the general dental service), makes any necessary bids for resources to Department of Finance and Personnel and allocates resources to the Boards and Agency.

Chief Dental Officer

- 5.3 The Chief Dental Officer provides advice to the Minister and administrative colleagues on dentistry in NI and its implementation at Board level. She is responsible for all aspects of dental services (general dental service, community dental service and hospital dental service).

Referral Dental Service

- 5.4 Referral Dental Officers are under the control of the Chief Dental Officer and undertake post treatment examinations on a percentage of general dental service patients to establish that the proper treatment was carried out and was of a good quality.

6. Role of the Boards

- 6.1 Boards are responsible for ensuring the delivery of general dental services at local level by general dental practitioners. All general dental practitioners are contracted to Boards to provide general dental services. As part of their management role Boards have to identify oral health needs, evaluate and monitor services and plan improvements, drawing on professional advice and information from a variety of sources. In conjunction with the Department they also have to ensure that there are adequate numbers of practitioners to deliver the service,
- 6.2 Boards have the central role in instigating and providing the structure and the impetus for the development of all dental services to meet the dental health needs of their population by:
- making services more responsive to the needs of the consumer;
 - promoting dental health and prevent dental disease;
 - raising standards of care;
 - giving patients the widest range of choice in obtaining high quality dental care services;
 - improving value for money.

7. Role of the Agency

- 7.1 The Agency acts for both the Department and Boards in the administration of the payments to general dental practitioners for providing general dental services. It also provides a wide range of statistical information to assist in the planning and delivery of the service. The Agency has specific responsibility for:
- the compilation and maintenance of the Dental List from information supplied by Boards;
 - the payment of fees and allowances to practitioners and provision of advice on matters relating to General Dental Services;
 - monitoring of regional and individual treatment patterns and referral of results to Boards for Action;

- financial monitoring;
- monitoring of claims for payment and referrals to the Department's Dental Referral Officers for post payment examination of patients;
- provision of statistical data to Boards and the Department;
- patient transfers between practitioners;
- approval of treatments requiring the prior approval of the Dental Committee;
- the administration of peer review and clinic audit schemes.

8. Role of the Practitioners

- 8.1 General dental practitioners are the providers of general dental services. They are not employed by Boards but are independent contractors who have undertaken to provide health service dental treatment. The number of practitioners currently providing treatment to the NI population is approximately 660. All general dental practitioners are also free to provide dental treatment on a private basis, although private and health service treatment cannot be mixed without the patient's agreement.
- 8.2 Under the Regulations, dental practitioners are required to provide, for any patient whom they have accepted for general dental services, all proper and necessary care and treatment which a dentist usually undertakes for a patient and which the patient is willing to undergo, including advice, planning of treatment and preventative care. However, there is no obligation on a dental practitioner to accept someone for treatment.
- 8.3 There are certain rules within which practitioners must operate when they are providing general dental services, and these are known as terms of service. The terms of service are laid down in the Regulations and any breaches of these terms of service may result in disciplinary action against the individual concerned, including the withholding and/or repayment of fees.

SERVICE DELIVERY

9. Obtaining Dental Care

- 9.1 The general public may choose to have dental treatment provided by any General Dental Practitioner on the Dental List, providing the practitioner is willing to accept the patient under General Dental Services.
- 9.2 A registered dental patient is entitled to:
- a plan of the proposed treatment and an estimate of the cost of that treatment;

- emergency treatment outside normal surgery hours; and
- repairs and replacements in certain circumstances.

10. Charges for Dental Treatment

10.1 Current Departmental policy is that people who can afford to contribute towards the cost of general dental services should do so through dental charges payable under the Dental Charges Regulations*. People likely to have difficulty in paying the charges are protected through exemption and charge remission arrangements under the Remission of Charges Regulations*. The amount someone has to pay for health service dental treatment depends on how much treatment is required, and the Department on an annual basis in line with the other three UK Health Departments sets charges for each type of treatment. The charge to the patient currently represents 80% of the cost of the treatment. There is also a maximum charge for any course of treatment above which the patient does not have to pay, currently £354.00.

10.2 Health service dental treatment is available free of charge to a patient who is:

- under 18 or a full time student under 19;
- an expectant mother;
- a woman who has had a baby or a still-birth in the previous twelve months;

or if they or their partner are receiving:

- income support;
- working families tax credit/disabled persons tax credit where the maximum credit is reduced by £70 or less.
- job seeker's allowance (income-based)

or they are:

named on a valid HS Low Income Scheme certificate HC2 for full help

10.3 Where a person is not entitled to free dental treatment they may still get some help with dental costs if they are on a low income. This help is provided under the Health Service Low Income Scheme and is administered by Social Security Offices.

* Full details of the legislation are given in the Annex

ANNEX

Short Title	Full Title
1972 Order	Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 S.I.1972/1265 (N.I.14)
General Dental Services Regulations	General Dental Services Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 S.R.1993 No.326
Dental Charges Regulations	Dental Charges Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989 S.R.1989 No.111
Remission of Charges Regulations	Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charges Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989 S.R.1989 No.348