

Collaborating to improve wellbeing

A member of the collaborative group that has created the brand-new wellbeing guide for dental team members, Roz McMullan, past president of the BDA, a retired orthodontist and a mental health campaigner, shares with readers why this is such an important resource

How did the idea and collaboration for the guide on 'Wellbeing Support for the Dental Team' come about?

Roz: For years I have an interest in wellbeing in the dental practice and, when I was president of the BDA, we arranged an event focused on wellbeing and dentistry. We had a workshop at the end of that day, and out of that came a number of work streams that we thought we could take forwards as collaborative work.

Who have you created it for and why did you feel it was so important for the dental profession?

Roz: I think, first of all, it's important to say that it is for the dental team, not just dentists.

Pre-Covid figures suggest that 59% of general dentist practitioners showed significant signs of burnout and psychological distress. Dental team workers in the community dental services weren't much better at 47%, hospital-based were at 36%, and for academics the figure was 33%. Many reported they were considering leaving dental practice because of their stress levels.

When life is difficult things can seem overwhelming and I think we all understand the ultimate risks. The truth is that some dental team members do have suicidal thoughts and we must never sweep that under the carpet, but at the same time it is important to note that dentistry figures are on a par with the general population.

At the moment, not everyone reaches out for help as early as we would like them to, partly because it can be really hard to know how to find that help.

We need to make sure help is available for everyone who is feeling stressed and / or distressed, and this guide offers a very important first step for finding the right kind of support. My hope for this easy-access guide is that it will enable dental team members to find contacts for people who can help them really easily without having to get to a point where they are acutely unwell.

You have mentioned some aspects of what you want to achieve with the guide, what else do you hope for?

Roz: It's a handbook that is full of practical advice and organisations to contact, and we see it as one tool in the tool bag to get people who access it moving in the right direction.

Will it cure all the problems? No, it won't. But it is a useful resource, not just for people who are beginning to struggle, but also people who know of others who are beginning to struggle. If you are wondering how you can help your friend or colleague, the guide is the ideal starting point.

Why do you think dental team members are so bad at looking after themselves?

Roz: There is a lot of research out there indicating that carers do not look after or care for themselves and that's at all levels. There's speculation as to reasons why they have little insight into their own wellbeing. I think they are very focused on looking after their charges – dental patients and other



members of the team in our circumstances, of course – and it's often easier to be kinder to others than ourselves.

People also often worry about a perceived 'weakness' following them throughout their career if they go to their GP or Occupational Health. The truth is, asking for help is a sign of strength. Perceptions are changing and dentistry needs to be part of that, and we need to make sure we take good care of ourselves and our colleagues and find out how to get the right type of help.

How can they begin to overcome the fear of any perceived stigma – both from themselves and others?

Roz: I think we have to look at this in the wider context of society. I think that the work the Royals have done, the work that well-known sports people have done in making it okay not to be okay, has gone some way to saying, 'Your perception of my life is not accurate, and it's okay'.

Society is beginning that journey to acceptance, but we've got to build on that. When I'm speaking to groups of dentists, dental nurses, hygienists and therapists, students – everyone and anyone in the team – I emphasise the importance of carrying out a risk assessment of their practice.

For example, if you're in a practice that is high achieving with a lot of young dentists who are a bit competitive, you might find you have a wellbeing issue and the key here – just as with dental care – is prevention. There are a lot of simple strategies that can help, and you might want to create the position of a well-being team lead who can say things like, 'We're going to have a walk today'.

I also want to encourage members of the dental team, not just those who take on

that sort of role, to look after each other, be someone available for a chat if needed.

What signs should people be looking out for, both in themselves and in colleagues?

Roz: The signs include mood swings and a tendency to isolate themselves. There's also something called 'depersonalisation', which is this feeling of having a negative impact on other people. You might find yourself making derogatory remarks about someone or something that you would never have done in normal times. It is a coping mechanism to stop things getting under your skin. Overuse of alcohol or medication is another possible sign that things are awry.

If you recognise that a friend or a colleague is struggling, how can you begin that conversation with them?

Roz: People tend not to say what they think should be said. They stay quiet, because they are worried that they will disrupt a good relationship, whether that's working relationships or personal relationships. But in fact, a good relationship will survive a kind challenge. It will survive that, 'Are you okay?'

Sometimes someone will say, 'I am perfectly alright.' But they might come back two days later and speak about how they're feeling because you made yourself open to that dialogue. So, that kind challenge I just mentioned might result in a fruitful conversation that leads to a positive place.

The guide seems particularly timely. How do you feel it fits in with the world we now find ourselves navigating through as individuals and as members of the dental profession?

Roz: There have been epidemics before

Covid, so there's some really good research on wellbeing in these kinds of circumstances, particularly H1N1 and SARS. So, we do know there is a pattern through a pandemic for those who are frontline health care workers, and dentists are exactly that.

You see a pattern of the people in that kind of work, the exhaustion, the moral injury as they deal with guidelines, the confusion between countries, and the blurring of lines between work and home, the potential for domestic abuse. If you're stuck with Covid all day, you come home, you turn on the TV, you're given another load of pandemic news, it's very hard to switch off.

There also an inherent fear about staying safe in practice and the stress involved in making all the necessary changes, and hopefully the team working together can mitigate these worries. But we do expect this to go on for some time and the emotional fallout will last even longer. Some mental health professionals are saying seven years, and there is a risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which may be misdiagnosed in health care professionals, which makes for a dangerous scenario.

That said, all four countries in the UK have put together absolutely marvellous resources to help and support all health care workers through Covid and we're very grateful for that.

While the guide is inadvertently timely, the challenges of Covid will pass and we want this guide to take its rightful place to build in prevention and raise awareness of avenues for improved wellbeing for the dental team.

To download your copy of *Wellbeing Support for the Dental Team* free of charge, please visit: www.supportfordentalteams.org ■