

Introducing a new chapter for wellbeing

In this exclusive interview, **Dr Shalini Nayee**, a member of the collaborative group that has created the brand-new wellbeing guide for dental team members, discusses the importance of recognising that it is okay not to feel okay and where to find help.

You're the youngest member on the steering group. Is there a trend of more young professionals suffering with their mental health?

SN Overall, I would say no, but it is a complicated issue. A lot of the research about stress, burnout and mental health problems in the dental profession has focused on dentists rather than the wider dental team. And it's further focused on young dentists, because the transition from university to graduating and working as a young dentist is seen as an important point in anyone's career where potentially people might be subject to more mental health problems.

However, data that are available for dentists would suggest that it is older dentists who are more susceptible to mental health problems, but clearly any dental professional of any age could have a mental health problem.

How did you get involved in the creation of the newly published 'Wellbeing Support for the Dental Team' guide?

SN I heard that this collaborative was putting a document together and they were looking for someone who could lead on writing a draft of it. They were looking for someone at registrar level and I fitted the bill and applied.

Amongst our collaborative there's an exceptional depth of expertise because we have individuals who have spent a large proportion of their career looking at these issues and helping members of the dental team who are in need.

Unlike most members of our collaborative, I didn't have a specific background in mental health or wellbeing. However, I believe most of us within the dental profession recognise that it can be a highly challenging and stressful profession, whatever your role. And this was a chance for me to do something proactive and helpful. So I think those are the things that really attracted me.

I think it is worth saying that this document was conceived before the pandemic. But by the time it was decided to proceed, COVID-19 was very much ongoing, so it felt particularly pertinent and essential for us to get it out as soon as possible. Obviously COVID-19 has taken a huge physical toll on society.

In your experience, how has it impacted the mental wellbeing of the profession?

SN I think the entire period has been a time of anxiety and uncertainty for society as a whole, and continues to be.

Within the dental profession, that's particularly been the case because of the changes to dental practice that have occurred. We all know that dentistry was suspended in the first wave. Although routine dentistry is now up and running, actually there are vast changes in the way we work, for instance in relation to the number of patients we can see, in terms of our PPE and all the protocols we have to follow.

How worried are you about the overall mental health and wellbeing of the dental team?

SN There are lots of members of the dental team who have had dramatic changes in their roles. Within my setting in hospital, dental team members have been redeployed to medical wards, to vaccinate and to ITU. I ended up in ENT for a spell.

These are obviously really different roles to what any of us would ever probably have imagined we'd be doing during a career in dentistry. Such a change in roles and the uncertainty, I think, has brought about increased concerns about mental health within the workforce.

Why has it taken until 2021 to produce such a useful guide for the profession?



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SN I think that it's just something that hadn't quite happened until now. Over the last few years, there's been quite an increase in the provision and availability of mental health support, both nationally and within dentistry and healthcare. So perhaps it just wasn't quite the right time in the sense that you needed a good range of available support to build up.

Also, in the past, when maybe there were only a few organisations offering support, actually there was probably less need for a cohesive document like 'Wellbeing Support for the Dental Team'. We're now in a situation where people can access support from dental charities, from NHS organisations and more general, national organisations.

So at this stage, I think having a collective resource that signposts all of the available resources is really helpful. When someone is going through a challenging time or is in crisis, we want to make things as easy as possible so that they're not having to work out where they might access support. I think any barriers to accessing support might deter someone who doesn't necessarily feel comfortable coming forward to say they need help. So, making things as easy as possible is an important step in helping people to get support.

Is it easier to talk about mental health and wellbeing concerns to colleagues than ever before?

SN I think there's generally been a trend across the UK for us to be more open about mental health and wellbeing.

Within the dental profession, I suspect there may be a generational divide, in that younger dentists may feel more confident talking about mental health, for example. I also think, broadly speaking, the national initiatives on mental health have filtered down into dentistry and general healthcare, and it's been really beneficial for raising awareness of this topic.

We hope our document in itself also raises awareness of the issues and makes people realise that it's okay to need support. The very existence of this document will hopefully underline to people that it's accepted and acknowledged that people need support sometimes and where to find that help.

If there is one take-home message for the profession, what would that be?

SN I'm not sure if I have a message for the profession, but I think that the key thing that we as a collective want to convey is that this guide is for everyone within the dental team, clinical and non-clinical. That's whether you're working in practice, in a managerial role, as a

receptionist, a dentist, hygienist, therapist, or you might be a clinical dental technician or working within a hospital's speciality; it's for every single member of the dental team.

We also provide coverage for people across the UK, because there are some small differences in the provision that's available across the UK.

We don't imagine that everyone will read the guide cover to cover, but we hope that it's something that can be kept in your staffroom, with your practice manager or within your office environment, wherever you work. It's something that people can access easily and have a look at if they think that they or a colleague requires help.

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

Dr Shalini Nayee is an NIHR Academic Clinical Fellow in Oral Medicine and holds dual qualification in medicine and dentistry. She is a member of an independent collaborative group of dental and mental health professionals who have put together a wellbeing resource for the UK dental team, 'Wellbeing Support for the Dental Team'.

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