

The Dental Laboratory Industry July 2020

The position the dental laboratory industry finds itself in currently is potentially catastrophic for the profession of dental technology. On the 8th June 2020 dental practices were able to re-open, however due to COVID-19 the number of AGP's have been dramatically reduced and this has had a major impact on the volume and type of cases received by dental laboratories.

Private laboratories are receiving a less than 15% of their normal workload, since the re-opening of dentistry and of those dental laboratories open and providing services to NHS dental practices, 61% reported receiving no or minimal number of prescriptions to manufacture. In the same DLA survey carried out in July it discovered 35% have still not been able to re-open at any level and most laboratories are trying to survive on repairs, additions and some new prosthetic work. There are 1000's of technicians, and laboratory workers who have been Furloughed, and as many as 65 % of this work force are currently facing being made redundant as the Furlough scheme changes and support reduces.

The abatement of dental fees to clinicians takes back a % that would have been paid to the dental laboratory industry, and this is around 14%. If this money could still be channeled into the laboratories in some way it would provide a vital lifeline for the profession.

All UK dental laboratories are regulated by the MHRA, and currently there are around 1800 registered with the MHRA. To survive, these businesses need some financial support, or the dental technology profession faces being decimated by COVID-19.

If a direct commissioning scheme to support MHRA registered laboratories could be formulated it would create a potential lifeline for dental laboratories, provide a set fee for NHS custom made dental appliances and provide reassurance that the appliances manufactured for the NHS are compliant. A direct commissioning arrangement with dental laboratories would recognise dental technology as a key element to the dental provision in the NHS rather than be classed as a consumable; essentially it would also help rescue a significant percentage of the registered dental technicians and technical support staff facing certain unemployment.

Introducing a new direct payment pathway with dental laboratories would provide commissioners insightful data into complex treatment provisions that would enable greater forecasting and aid the development of preventative messages in key oral health areas. This data would also allow dental laboratories to construct viable business models based on a fixed fee per item. Ultimately removing the fee considerations and negotiations from the dental practice will create an environment where clinicians need only focus on compliance and quality.

Dental technicians are a vital part of the dental team, they have undertaken years of training to develop their skills, which should not be allowed to be lost to the profession.

The Dental Laboratory Association represents around 1100 dental laboratory businesses, its COVID-19 position paper asks

1. For the Government to look at developing a support package for dental laboratories which manufacture NHS custom made dental appliances on prescription from an NHS dental practice.
2. For the GDC to withhold demanding their Annual Retention Fee for Dental Technicians this year.
3. For greater urgency to be placed on research into dental AGP services and the associated risks to allow dental practices to return to 'normal' service provisions as soon as possible.
4. For the Department of Health to review their current position on direct commissioning of dental laboratory services to the NHS beyond the current COVID-19 outbreak.