

Dental charges revealed

Queues to join NHS dentists are still with us. We explain what you'll pay if you have to go private, and the proposed new NHS charges

OUR RESEARCH

In March our researchers called 30 private dental practices in each of eight regions spread across Britain (240 practices in all). We asked about guide prices for three private treatments: a routine check-up, scale and polish; a tooth-coloured filling in a back tooth; and a replacement porcelain crown on a front tooth. We also asked for a price guide and a practice leaflet to be sent to us by post.

See www.which.co.uk/dentists for details of the research we did in January.

‘When we moved to Wales from Devon, I could find only one NHS dentist in the area, and the books were full. So I was forced to start calling private dentists. The only one I could find who was taking people on is 40 minutes away by car. I'm a supporter of the NHS and I'm angry and frustrated that I have to pay for private dental treatment.’

This reader asked us not to identify him – he's worried that his dentist might strike him off. With no option to register with a local NHS dentist, he's fortunate that he can afford private treatment; thousands can't. His story is typical: when we called 479 dental practices across Britain back in January, 58 per cent weren't taking on new NHS patients. In 2001 this figure was 40 per cent. Last month the Public Accounts Committee, which checks government spending, estimated that two million

Under the proposed system, you'll pay one of three set fees

people want to register for NHS treatment but can't. So it's no surprise that the photo above is not unique – it shows people queuing to join a practice that had started to accept NHS patients again.

We're campaigning to improve NHS dentistry. We want more investment, a contract that encourages dentists to offer NHS care, and affordable charges. For those who choose to go private, we want a private dental market that works.

But our latest research shows that it doesn't. Too many practices are not giving people all the information they're entitled to. And we've found that a filling can cost as little as £15 or as much as £200 – a bill that could cause as much pain as a toothache if you're not told about it in advance.

ACCESSING AN NHS DENTIST

Although UK residents are entitled to NHS dental care, it can often be hard to find a practice taking on NHS patients. There's a general shortage of dentists – and they're not obliged to take people on.

A new contract may improve things. It will encourage dentists to take on NHS patients by paying for the number of them treated, rather than by treatment. However, the new contract won't be up and running until April 2006 in England and Wales – and a date has yet to be set for Scotland.

There is some good news: the Department of Health has set out a new system of patient charges for England, which we support (and similar reforms are planned for Scotland and Wales, although the details haven't yet been announced). In Scotland, patients are set to get an even better deal as, from 2007, people will get free oral health assessments and dental examinations. But we're concerned that there are too few dentists to carry out the free assessments.

Currently, NHS patients pay 80 per cent of the set cost of treatment, up to a maximum of £384 (£354 in Wales) per course of treatment. You might be able to claim free treatment or help with the costs according to your circumstances – for instance, if you receive state benefits.

The new English system will work as follows. If you have to pay for your NHS dental work, you'll pay one of three set fees (called bands 1, 2 and 3) for a whole course of treatment, rather than pay for each separate item of treatment. (At the moment, for instance, you would be charged for a check-up, and an extra sum for each filling you needed.) In England, band 1 will cost £15, band 2 costs £41 and band 3 costs £183.

The band depends on the complexity of the work you need. For a check-up, advice and a scale and polish you will pay the band 1 fee. Fillings will be in band 2, and a bridge or dentures will be in band 3 (you pay only one fee – you're not charged for band 1 and band 3, say).

WHEN YOU HAVE TO GO PRIVATE

Kirsten Holt is another reader who's had trouble finding a dentist. She moved to Dumfries in 2004, only to find that there was an 18-month waiting time for NHS treatment. 'I personally phoned every

Dentists: your rights

When changing your dentist

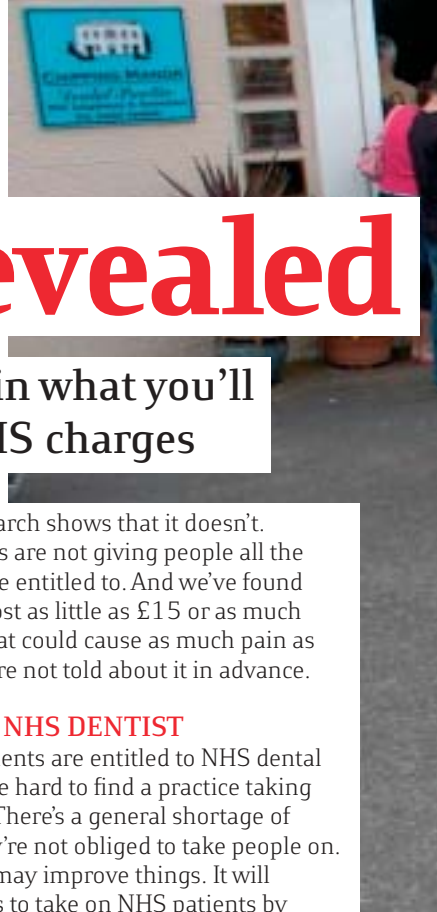
- UK residents have a right to NHS treatment – but dentists aren't obliged to take on NHS patients. So you may not find one locally.
- If you change dentists, your records should automatically be transferred to your new one. If your practice stops offering NHS treatment, it's meant to tell you how to find one that does.

When registering, make sure you get:

- anything that might help you to decide whether you want to register, such as a guide price for a particular treatment
- a price guide, with the cost of common treatments as well as any registration fee and the cost of an initial consultation
- a practice leaflet and details of the surgery's complaints procedure.

When being treated, you're entitled to:

- an explanation of your treatment options, including any risks or benefits
- a written plan, with estimated costs and details of what will be done on the NHS and what privately
- prior warning of any changes to the plan
- enough information to give informed consent for treatment
- an itemised bill.



PHOTOGRAPHY GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO, REUTERS, EMPICS



A queue to join a practice in Chipping Manor that's accepting new NHS patients

single dentist in Dumfries and not one was taking NHS or private patients. I couldn't even get on to a waiting list for private treatment here,' she told us. Kirsten works 20 miles away in Annan, so she phoned dentists there: 'There were no NHS dentists with spaces, and only one of the five private dentists I rang took patients from Dumfries. There are many low-income families in Dumfries and although I can, through gritted teeth, pay privately, this option is not available to them. I'm so angry.'

Many people know there's a problem with NHS treatment – it's less well known that finding private dentists is hard. Our January research showed that a quarter of practices are closed to all new patients (and the figure's 38 per cent in Scotland).

When we looked at private dentistry four years ago, we found that patients were getting a raw deal. Dentists charged very different prices for the same treatment, but at least one in five practices wouldn't give any information on typical charges before treatment. As a result of our campaigning, dentists must now display 'indicative prices' for key services. And the General Dental Council (GDC) says dentists should give 'full information on proposed treatment and possible costs' and make sure that they have an effective complaints procedure.

We've found that not all dentists are following the rules. 'There's no price guide – everybody has a

different mouth...a different cost.' That's what one practice told us. But without information on typical prices, you can't judge whether a dentist is cheap or expensive unless you pay for an examination first. The good news is that all but 13 of the 240 practices we rang gave our researchers guide prices for three treatments. But, as the figures below and overleaf show, the range of prices is huge.

Disappointingly few practices – just over three in ten – sent our researchers a price guide. Not everyone can get to a surgery easily, so practices should be prepared to send out this key information. Fewer than half of the 240 practices sent us a practice leaflet; of these, fewer than one in ten provided details of the complaints procedure. Such a system can be effective only if patients know about it. And the Office of Fair Trading recommends that dentists give patients these key bits of information. (See 'Dentistry: a potted history', overleaf.)

It's worrying that so many practices have such a sloppy approach to giving information to patients. We think the GDC should be doing more to ensure dentists meet its standards – such as carrying out spot checks similar to the one we've done, and then taking action. Without these checks on private dentists, readers like our anonymous member in Wales may find that failing to find NHS dental treatment is just the start of their problems.

TAKE ISSUE

What do you think should be done about NHS dentistry?

Email your experiences and views on this or any other topic in *Which?* to us at letters@which.co.uk

We'll print some in the magazine and more online at www.which.co.uk/whichextra

Mapping out the difference

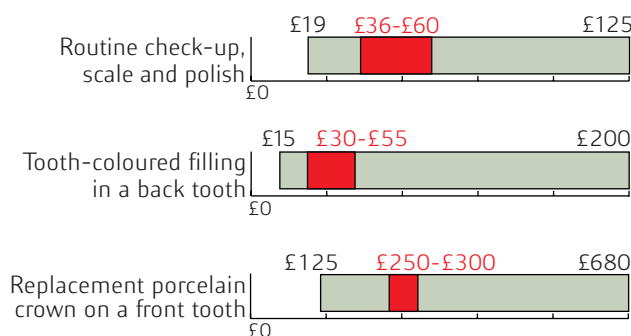
The cost of being forced to go private is obvious: private charges are three times higher on average than NHS prices – and vary hugely.

For a routine check-up, scale and polish, the NHS cost is £15. The lowest private price we found was £19 in Leicester; the highest was up to £125 in northwest London. Nationwide, the typical cost was £36 to £60.

You can't get a tooth-coloured filling in back

teeth on the NHS. Typical private prices for this were £30 to £55. The lowest quote (just £15) was in Dorset. In northwest London, however, one practice quoted us up to £200.

And for a replacement porcelain crown on a front tooth, you'd expect to pay £250 to £300 privately and £92 on the NHS. In Dorset, one practice was charging as little as £125; in Glasgow, we were quoted a whopping £680.



Some dentists quoted single prices for the three treatments; others gave us price ranges. Typical ranges and average prices are based on the lower price of any range quoted.

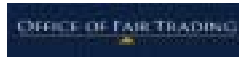
Highest prices are based on the highest price of any range.

Key to dentist prices

Lowest Typical Highest

Dentistry: a potted history

October 2001 We complain to the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) about the private dentistry market.



August 2002 Health minister David Lammy sets out proposals to modernise the dental service.



June 2003 The government accepts the OFT's recommendations and launches an action plan on private dentistry.

March 2003 The OFT publishes its recommendations on the private dental market. The Health and Social Care Bill is published, introducing legislation for the proposed dental reforms.

July 2004 The Chief Dental Officer publishes *NHS Dentistry: Delivering Change*, and announces extra investment of £250 million a year from 2005/06.

The then Secretary of State for Health, Dr John Reid, pledges 1,000 more dentists by October 2005 and £368 million to fund reforms.



August 2004 Government announces that the General Dental Council will 'get more teeth': a new complaints system for private patients and 'more robust' fitness-to-practice procedures.



Summer 2005 The Department of Health is consulting on new NHS patient charges.

April 2006 Proposed date of the introduction of a new contract for dentists (postponed from October 2005).

which? says

We welcome the government's moves to inject money and staff into NHS dentistry. We're disappointed that the new contract for dentists has been delayed until April 2006. But we welcome the new patient charging system.

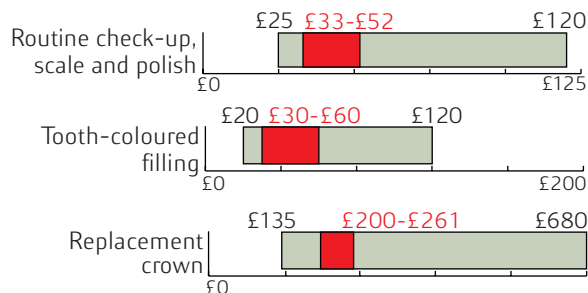
Our Stop the Rot campaign is calling for an end to the erosion of NHS dental services: we still think the

government must do more to make NHS dentistry a priority.

So we want the money given in England to local health bodies to be ringfenced for front-line services. And we want a real obligation on these bodies to provide dental care for people who need it. Go to www.which.co.uk/dentists to let us know what you think.

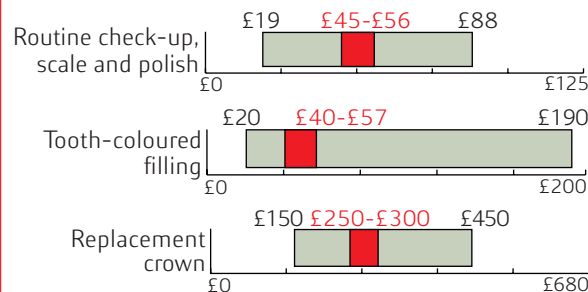
Glasgow

One Glasgow practice quoted up to £680 for a replacement porcelain crown – the highest price we found. There was also a large range of prices (£95) for the routine check-up, scale and polish.



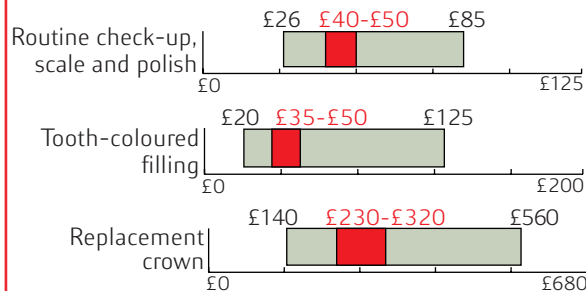
Leicester

In Leicester dentists quoted from £20 up to £190 for a tooth-coloured filling – nearly as big a range as in northwest London and Dorset. We found the lowest price (£19) for the check-up, scale and polish in Leicester.



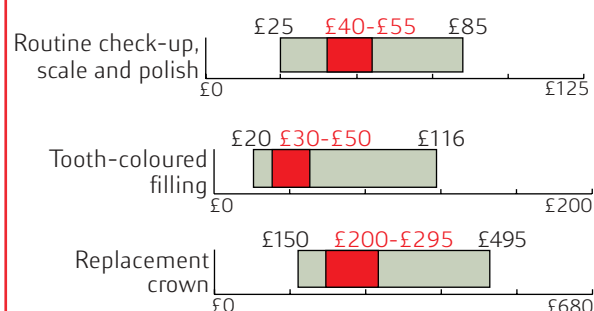
West Midlands

We found the second-highest price for the crown here (up to £560) and the second-largest range of quotes (£420 difference). Average prices for the other treatments were slightly below the overall average.



Cardiff

On average, Cardiff practices charged slightly less for a porcelain crown than the overall average of £260. It was a similar picture for the tooth-coloured filling.



FURTHER INFORMATION

General Dental Council
020 7887 3800
www.gdc-uk.org

If you're not registered with a dentist and you need treatment, call:
NHS Direct (England and Wales)
0845 46 47
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
NHS 24 (Scotland)
08454 242424
www.nhs24.com

Who pays the most?

Routine check-up, scale and polish Dorset and northwest London are dearer than Glasgow, Newcastle and the West Midlands.

Key to dentist prices

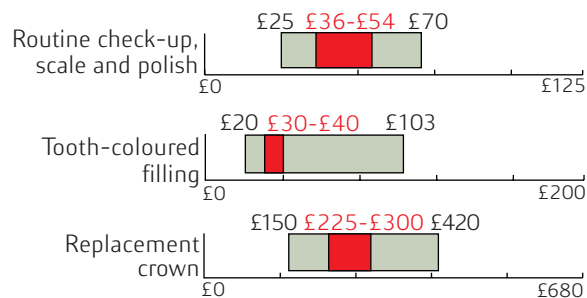
Lowest Typical Highest

Tooth-coloured filling (back tooth) Northwest London was expensive as was Cheshire; those in Newcastle get the best deal.

Porcelain crown (front tooth) Northwest London and Dorset were again the most expensive.

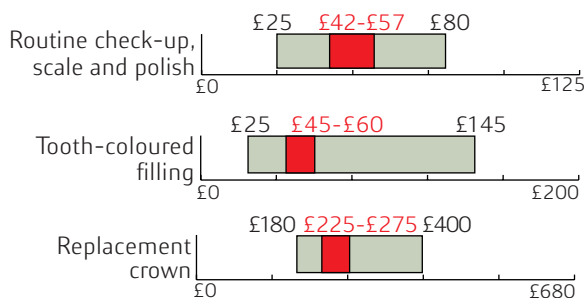
Newcastle

We found the smallest range of quotes here for a check-up, scale and polish (a £45 difference) and tooth-coloured filling (£83). For both, the highest quotes were lower than the highest in any other area.



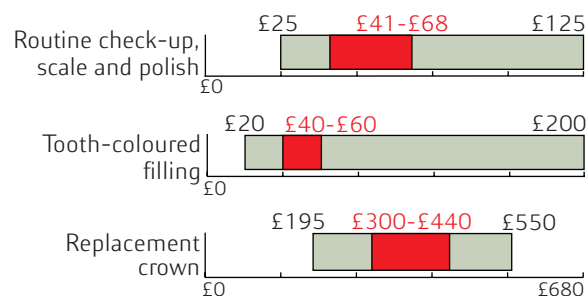
Cheshire

The average price of a porcelain crown among Cheshire dentists was £10 cheaper than the overall average. And the range of prices quoted for this treatment was the smallest – a difference of £220.



Northwest London

Ouch. London had the widest range of prices for tooth-coloured fillings (£20 to £200), as well as for the check-up, scale and polish (£25 to £125). The average price for the crown was £90 more than elsewhere.



Dorset

As in northwest London and Leicester, Dorset practices gave a wide range of quotes for a tooth-coloured filling – a difference of £175 – partly because one gave us the lowest guide price (from £15) for this treatment.

