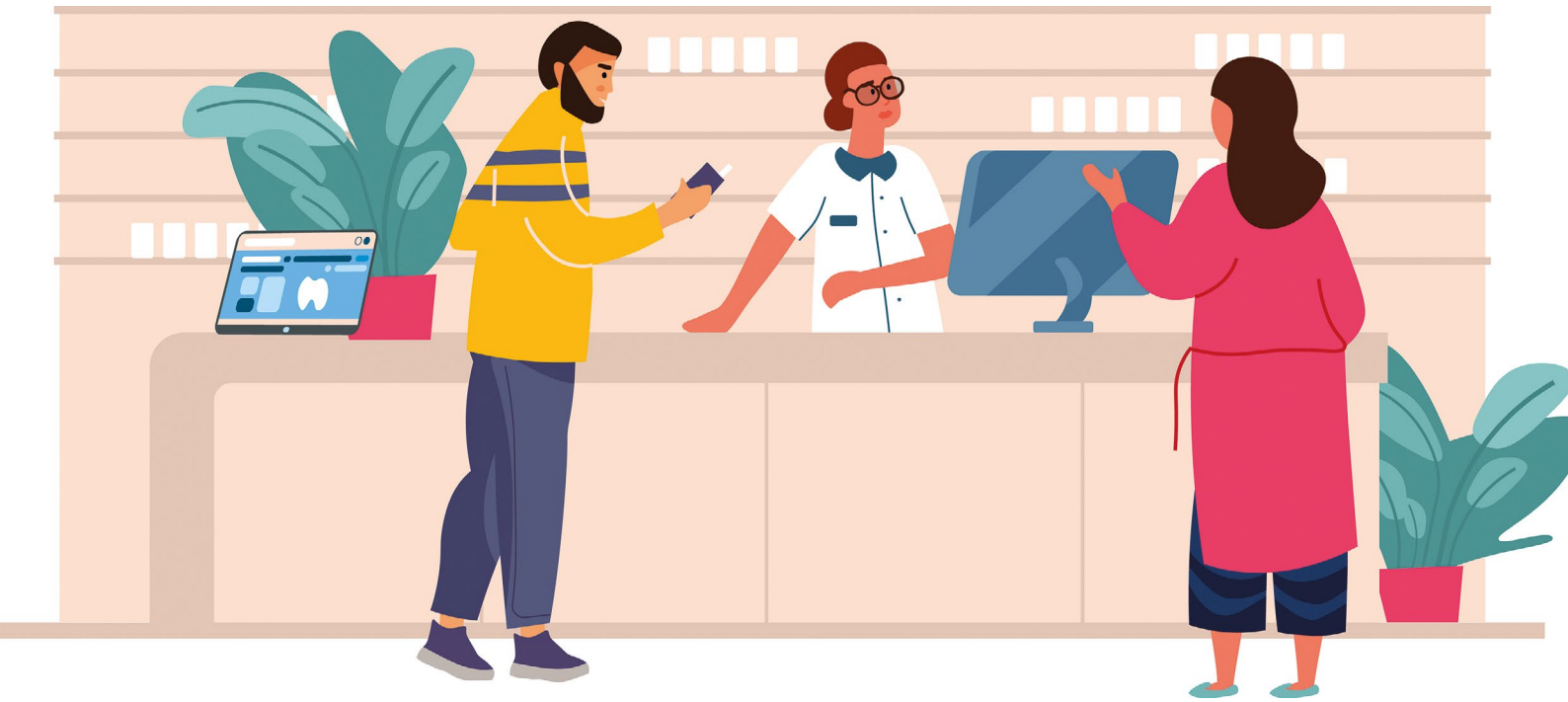


A forgotten workforce: Attending to the mental health and wellbeing of dental administrative staff





Jennie Knights[1] with **Ian Mills**[2] and **Toni Batty**[3] discuss their recent research published in the *BDJ* (https://go.nature.com/4hXRfSo) which explores the mental health and wellbeing of dental practice managers and receptionists in UK dental workplaces.

Interview

BDJ Team: *Congratulations on your publication 'Bearing the brunt: an exploration of the mental health and wellbeing of dental practice managers and receptionists in UK dental workplaces'.[1] Can you tell us how this study came about?*

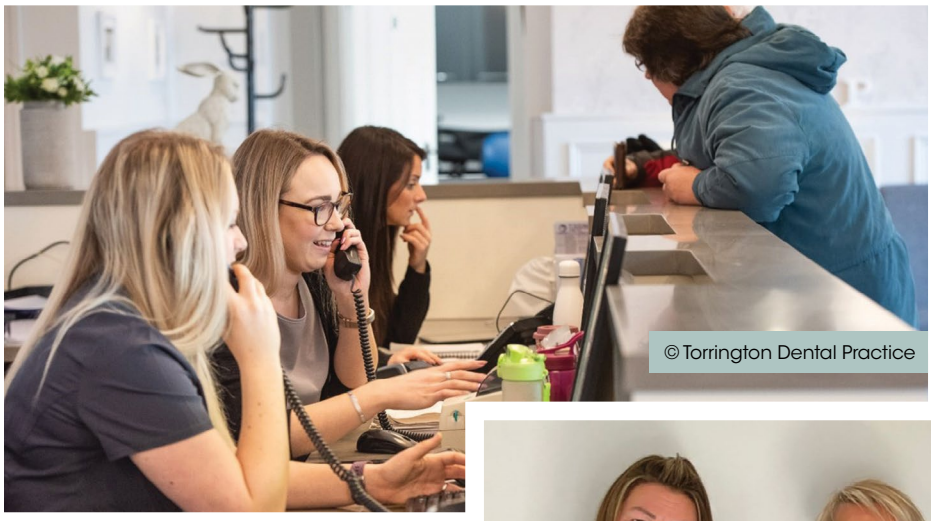
Jennie: Sure, the study is part of a larger research project called MINDSET U.K. where a group of researchers and experts in mental health and dentistry from across the UK are looking at levels of burnout and depression in dental teams. We were keen that dental administrative staff were invited to participate, and the results reported in a standalone study. Too often these staff are forgotten about when it comes to health care research and their voices and needs go unheard.

Author information

[1]Jennifer Knights is a Specialist Research Lead at NHS Education for Scotland and Chief Investigator (Scotland) for the MINDSET U.K. Project. She is also an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Dundee. Jennie is currently undertaking a PhD with the University of Birmingham exploring how lower-paid 'back-office' NHS administrative staff in bureaucratic settings construct meaning and find value in the practice of their work. [2]Professor Ian Mills is a Partner at Torrington Dental Practice, Devon and Associate Professor of Primary Care Dentistry at Peninsula Dental School, University of Plymouth.[3]Toni Batty is a Practice Manager at Torrington Dental Practice with an MBA in Healthcare Business Administration and Management and over 25 years' experience in dental practice management and administration.

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BDJ Team: *Toni, you are a dental practice manager in the southwest of England. What was your response to the findings? Were there any surprises?*

Toni: Sadly, the findings very much reflect our own experiences over the last few years. All staff are struggling with the pressures of work, but our reception team are often at the sharp end and frequently bear the brunt of patient frustration. The demand for NHS dentistry is unprecedented and patients are increasingly desperate to be seen. This can often lead to frustration and anger, which tends to be targeted at reception staff and managers. This can be upsetting, and at times frightening for staff, who often feel they are being blamed for the inadequacies of the NHS. These experiences take their toll on the team, and we have seen increased levels of absenteeism due to work-based stress and burnout. We have also had several colleagues leave dentistry due to the pressures and stress of the job.



A practice wellbeing day with instructors providing sessions on pilates, yoga, nutrition and positive thinking was well received at Torrington Dental Practice. © Torrington Dental Practice

'The reception team will often have multiple roles within the practice, but one of their most challenging is undoubtedly acting as the intermediary between the patient and the clinician.'

BDJ Team: *You undertook an anonymous online survey, what sort of questions did you ask?*

Ian: Some of your readers may be familiar with a short patient questionnaire used by GPs to monitor depression; we used a shortened version of this in our survey to assess depressive symptomology. We also asked sets of questions which measure levels of burnout and preparedness to practise. Many staff had told us that they were still feeling the impact of the pandemic, so we included questions from a scale widely used for screening for post-traumatic stress disorder as well. A free-text box was available for participants to share their thoughts and experiences if they wished.

BDJ Team: *Could you summarise for our readers what you found out?*

Ian: Absolutely. In total, we had 130 questionnaire responses from staff who identified as dental practice managers or receptionists. Almost 8% scored as being at significant risk of occupational burnout. Forty-one percent scored as 'high' on the emotional exhaustion scale, which is one of three components of burnout. Clearly this is very worrying, not only for those individuals but in terms of the potential negative impact on staff retention in the dental sector. The ability of the system to keep administrative staff well and at work is fundamental to the efficient and effective running of dental services.

Jennie: Another worrying finding was that 22% of participants were experiencing high feelings of detachment towards patients. This is another of the components of burnout. We believe that this finding can be explained, at least in part, by the increased exposure of dental administrative staff to frustrated and aggressive patients. In the free-text responses participants told us that relationships with patients have become increasingly difficult since the pandemic and that some are taking out their frustrations on the reception team, hence the article title 'bearing the brunt'! Receptionists should really be thought of as front-line health care staff and it be better recognised that their roles involve a lot of 'hidden' emotional work.

Ian: We also found that relationships with clinical colleagues have become more difficult for some participants due to the multiple pressures on the whole dental team in terms of access and demand. The current crisis in NHS dentistry is undoubtedly a major contributing factor.

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BDJ Team: *We understand that your practice has been doing some work around trying to improve staff wellbeing, can you tell us more?*

Toni: Our practice was an early adopter of the Mental Health & Wellness in Dentistry Framework[2] (MHWiDF) which has been really helpful in allowing us to place a greater focus on mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. We have a mental health lead, and three members of staff have been trained as mental health first aiders, but it is important to stress that the whole team are involved in trying to create a more supportive environment. The MHWiDF ensures that we maintain a constant focus on health and wellbeing within the team and has encouraged us to take a more preventative, proactive approach. The various activities and training we do as a team have given us better insight and understanding of the challenges which we all face at work and at home, and I believe we are a bit more empathetic as a result.

All staff have access to help and support online with ten hours of personal coaching available if they wish. We have also done lots of fun team activities such as yoga, pilates, nutritional advice, psychometric testing, mindfulness, outdoor activities, volunteer days and we even had a live concert at the practice for Mind.[3] All these things are great, but to be honest it is the little acts of kindness which can really make the difference.

BDJ Team: *How do you think implementing the MHWiDF has particularly helped the receptionists and others with administrative duties in the practice?*

Toni: I am sure the framework has helped everyone at the practice to some extent, some more than others. We have learnt together, and our training has introduced us to a variety of tools to help at an individual level. It has also helped us to realise that we all struggle from time to time, and the reasons why we are struggling at work may not always be immediately apparent. I think this has brought us closer together and has helped us build resilience within the team. Mental Health Wellness is a regular agenda item at our staff meetings, which ensures it is part of our regular discussions. The knowledge and experiences have also allowed us to appreciate the challenges many of our patients may also be facing at the present time, and this will hopefully enable us to be more understanding as healthcare professionals.

BDJ Team: *One of the themes in your research paper is around a lack of recognition of the work of dental administrative staff, what can be done about this?*

Jennie: It's a very important question. Some of our respondents did describe feeling undervalued and their work in facilitating the work of other members of the dental team going unrecognised. Issues around inequities with pay and conditions in comparison with other healthcare settings don't help, although it is worth highlighting that a lack of recognition is a common concern for administrative staff across NHS health care settings. Studies looking at GP receptionists for example have found that despite being the most visible members of the practice team, it is their contributions that are often hidden, and they can feel invisible to their clinical colleagues.

Toni: Each member of the dental team plays a critical role in the smooth running of a dental practice. The delivery of high-quality dental care for our patients simply would not be possible without every member of the team fulfilling their role. The reception team will often have multiple roles within the practice, but one of their most challenging is undoubtedly acting as the intermediary between the patient and the clinician. This can present its own challenges, particularly with the current state of NHS dentistry where demand massively outstrips capacity. Patients are often desperate to get an appointment, and the receptionist is often stuck in the middle trying to find space where there is none. This can often put the reception team in a difficult and stressful position, and the pressure they are under is not always recognised or appreciated. In the past, we have had clinicians spend some time on reception and this gives them quite an insight into the pressure and stress experienced on the front desk! We all face different pressures within the team, and it is important to recognise this and support each other at all times.

> *'The MINDSET U.K. project has brought together a fantastic group of highly knowledgeable and motivated individuals who have been able to highlight some of the challenges which the dental team face.'*

BDJ Team: *Finally, as we find ourselves at the start of a new year, what's next for the MINDSET U.K. project?*

Jennie: Our focus at the moment is finalising papers for a special collection being hosted online by the *British Dental Journal*.[4] We are also starting to consider future projects related to mental health in dental teams as there is plenty of work still needing to be done in this important area.

Ian: Dentistry is facing some major challenges at the present time, and the mental health and wellbeing of our workforce is critical if we wish to deliver care for our patients. The MINDSET U.K. project has brought together a fantastic group of highly knowledgeable and motivated individuals who have been able to highlight some of the challenges which the dental team face. The evidence base in dentistry is still sparse, and our recent survey is hopefully only the beginning.

If you are struggling with your mental health, please reach out for support. You can call Samaritans for free 116 123, day or night, 365 days a year, or email them at jo@samaritans.org.

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