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**10 June 2022**

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore  
Leinster House  
Kildare Street  
Dublin 2**

**PQ 28140/22: To ask the Minister for Health the steps that he is taking to address cost-cutting and staff shortages in the HSE dental section; when the free school dental exam will resume for all school classes for which the exam was available pre-Covid; and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

Dear Deputy Whitmore,

The Health Service Executive (HSE) has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Question, which you submitted to the Minister for response.

The HSE Dental Service provides dental treatment services to eligible children in targeted groups, people with special care needs and others in the care of the HSE. The emergence of Covid-19 in March 2020 has had a significant impact on the provision of all health services including dental services.

HSE Dental Services are provided through 17 Dental Areas, all of which continue to provide routine services. The dental service continues to prioritise treatment for people with special care needs, those who are medically compromised and provides emergency care for all eligible patients.

These services are delivered with a strong preventive ethos in order to minimise the incidence of dental disease in vulnerable populations. In particular this preventive approach involves the delivery of personalised oral health promotion for children and people with special care needs.

Since the emergence of Covid-19, there has been a significant increase in delays accessing routine treatment for those in target classes. This has resulted in backlogs emerging in the targeted schools programme. The numbers of those waiting for routine services relate to children waiting for their first routine dental appointment as part of a targeted approach. The scale of disruption to services in 2020 meant that routine attendance by children was reduced to 36.5% of 2019 activity, while in 2021 the comparable attendance was 54.5% of 2019 activity.

Throughout the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, the HSE responded to a number of emerging problems, including testing capacity, contact tracing and implementation of updated infection prevention and control guidance. Each of these has involved the HSE Dental Service, with extensive redeployment for testing and contact tracing, as well as for the mass vaccination programme. In some areas, access to clinical facilities was reduced due to repurposing for pandemic-related activities. The Cyber Attack on the HSE system in Summer 2021 also had a significant negative impact on Dental Services.

While most Oral Health staff have now returned to core duties enabling the safe resumption of services, strict adherence to physical distancing and enhanced infection prevention and control measures has reduced the capacity of the service and it is necessary to target the resources available. Each of the 17 Dental Areas has adopted a prioritised approach to the sequence in which targeted school classes will be called for oral examinations.

### **Actions being taken now to address from within current resources**

- Recruitment initiatives to fill vacancies that have arisen or may arise – a number of CHOs have run competitions for dentists, dental nurses and dental hygienists to fill vacancies, with panels created from the recruitment competitions.
- Prioritisation of clinical treatments and patient groups
  - each dental service maintains a commitment to urgent/emergency treatment for the relief of pain, infection, and the sequelae of trauma
  - priority is given to restoring the targeted programme to a current year basis.
  - targeted patient groups are prioritised with children and adults with special care needs given the highest priority, followed by children 6<sup>th</sup> class
  - waiting lists for dental treatment under general anaesthesia are validated and reviewed
- Reallocation of clinical resources to areas of greatest need – where service deficits are identified clinical teams are redirected to address those needs.

I trust this information is of assistance to you, but if you require further clarification please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,



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**Joseph Green**  
**AND, National Oral Health Lead - Operations**