

BAOS & BAOMS – Patient Waiting Lists, Overdose and Mental Health

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The postponement of elective surgery in hospitals to free-up bed space for COVID-19 patients has resulted in extremely long NHS waiting lists. The suspension of routine dental care from March to June 2020 has added to this and to similar problems for primary care oral surgery services.

Patients can be expected to experience harm as a consequence of delay in surgical care. Pain and infection will impact on patients' quality of life, but also on their general health including their mental health, and for some, risk to life itself because of severe airway compromise.

Pain may be managed to a limited degree with systemic analgesics but this can only be a temporary short-term holding position. Pulpitis is typically associated with severe continuous pain and this is difficult to control with paracetamol and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. There is risk of analgesic accidental overdose with unmanaged dental pain. The addition of mild opioids can help but their prescription is restricted outside hospital care. Many previous studies have reported accidental analgesic overdose by patients attempting to self-manage their dental pain because of difficulty in accessing dental services. The appropriate treatment is removal of the pulp or removal of the tooth. Paracetamol poisoning is the single most common cause of acute liver failure in the UK and dental pain is the leading cause of unintentional overdose.

Many colleagues have expressed frustration at not being able to provide timely care for patients as they would wish. Managing patients' expectations is become even more challenging. Some patients are vulnerable. There are risks heightening dental phobia and patients attempting their own interventional dental treatments with adverse outcomes.

Our advice is:

- Identify patients reporting excessive use of analgesics
- Take signs of depression seriously and inform the GP as soon as possible
- Seek prioritisation of services with Trust and Primary care managers

More information: BAOMS www.baoms.org.uk and BAOS www.baos.org.uk