

Health

Summary

# Dentistry

Primary dental care services in England and Wales

*The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, health and criminal justice services.*

*Our national studies on the performance of health services examine services from a user's perspective and identify and promote examples of good practice. We also appoint auditors to all health authorities, primary care trusts and NHS trusts in England and Wales.*

*Our work focuses on:*

- *Whether there are firm foundations of good management to improve services to patients and provide value for money.*
- *How well organisations inside and outside the NHS work together to provide the best care for patients.*
- *How effectively key resources, for example, doctors, nurses, theatres, equipment and budgets, are managed.*

📄 Copies of this report are available at:

[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

or to order a printed copy telephone:

0800 502030

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Sir Andrew Foster, Audit Commission,  
1 Vincent Square, London, SW1P 2PN  
Tel: 020 7828 1212

Stock code: HSY2846

### 'Family dentists' receive £1.6 billion annually for NHS dental work...

- fees are paid for work done – 'piecework'
- they come direct from the NHS and from people who pay charges for NHS work

**...and although access to urgent and drop-in care has improved since 1999, the Government, dentists and many patients agree that the service does not work well.**

- forty per cent of dental practices will not accept adults or children for continuing, preventative care on the NHS
- in some places, no dentists accept NHS patients
- dentists who provide NHS care feel that they are on a 'treadmill', having to work increasingly hard and quickly to keep their businesses going
- this brings risks to quality of NHS care

### The current system can be wasteful and confusing...

- unnecessary examinations for people with good dental health, and treatments that bring no proven benefit to health cost at least £150 million in England and £8 million in Wales
- in deprived areas fewer people are registered with a dentist
- patients are frequently unclear about whether charges are for NHS or private care

**...and little has changed.**

- deprived areas have the worst dental health and would benefit most from fluoridation, but there have been no new schemes since 1985
- changes to the piecework system have been proposed for nearly 40 years, yet it remains much the same today
- *Options for Change* (published in August 2002) is a welcome start because it invites dentists and primary care trusts to test better ways of working in England

### Patients should have clearer information...

- about which treatments are necessary, and which cosmetic
- about whether their treatment is available on the NHS or privately
- about charges for treatment

**...and the Government should focus resources on the most beneficial work.**

- emphasising prevention, including fluoridation of water supplies
- replacing the piecework system to concentrate funds on prevention and treatments that are of proven value to dental health
- not paying for cosmetic activities on the NHS