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Ministers look abroad to fill dentist holes

Images of long lines of people queuing to register with dentists has dogged the government for the past few years.

The opposition parties are promising to make it one of the key election battlegrounds for health with the Tories and Liberal Democrats urging the government to do more to recruit from home.

But as with teachers and nurses, ministers have started to turn abroad to fill the gaps by international recruitment.

There is a shortage of 1,850 dentists in England at the moment with only about half of the population registered with a surgery.

The government has promised to recruit 1,000 extra dentists by October - the majority of which could be foreign dentists.

A training programme has already been set up in Poland to test the professional and language skills of dentists who are willing to move to England.

Workforce

Some 29 Polish dentists have already started work in the UK and another 41 are expected to join them in the coming months to boost 19,000-strong workforce.

The government is currently exploring opportunities in Spain and Portugal and Indian dentists will be undergoing international exams over the next two weeks. But the British Dental Association (BDA) was critical of the moves, saying the government should increase access to training courses instead.

BDA chief executive Ian Wylie said: "While the BDA welcomes qualified dentists from overseas to ease the shortage, their recruitment offers only a short-term solution to the problems many patients experience accessing NHS dentistry.

"The irony is we've got queues of highly qualified young people wanting to train as dentists but dental schools in the UK have not got the places for them."

Health Minister Rosie Winterton, speaking from Poland's capital, Warsaw, where she was visiting the training programme, defended international recruitment.

She said had been impressed by the high standards of foreign dentists working in the NHS.

"Polish dentists working in England provide care for NHS patients and the NHS offers excellent opportunities for them to develop professionally."

And she added international recruitment was ensuring patients were being given access to more dentists.

The government is also increasing the number of places at medical schools by 170.

EU expansion

And Immigration Minister Des Browne praised the Polish scheme as a sign over how European Union expansion was benefiting England.

Poland was one of seven states to join the EU in May.

Mr Browne said: "The scheme is part of a common sense approach on fulfilling our labour market needs .

"It puts us at a clear advantage in being able to meet skills shortages while being able to monitor carefully the affects of accession on the labour market."



Queues for dentists have been seen around the country

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Andrew Lansley, Shadow Health Secretary

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And Polish dentists welcomed the opportunity to work in England.

Paulina Korzeniewska, a single mother who has worked as a dentist in Poland for 13 years, said the move will help bring security for her two children.

"I will feel more financially independent as I will probably be able to afford for my family's basic needs without any support."

Ms Korzeniewska, who is learning English at the moment, said she was looking forward to starting work in the UK in the coming months.

The government drive is the first time their has been a national scheme to recruit dentists from abroad.

International dentists already work in the NHS but these have been recruited on a local level.

However, opposition parties have been quick to attack the government for not doing enough to make dentistry attractive to the British market.

Ministers have sought to reform NHS dentistry by introducing a new contract which will pay dentists per patient rather than per treatment in the hope of ending the "drill and fill" and culture and enticing dentists back from private work.

But negotiations have broken down and introduction of the deal has been put back six months to next spring.

'Failing'

Shadow Health Secretary Andrew Lansley said the government has failed on dentistry.

"The government has allowed a two-tier system to develop, with a small number of people getting access to a NHS dentist and most forced to go private.

"NHS dentistry cannot be sustained by short term measures, such as recruiting from Poland.

"Conservatives would present a contract to incentivise dentists to stay in or join the NHS and facilitate the training of UK dentists."

And Liberal Democrat health spokesman Paul Burstow warned international recruitment must be "ethical and sustainable".

But he added: "Relying solely on overseas recruitment would be a sticking plaster solution.

"The answer is to encourage the large number of dentists in the UK who mainly work privately to increase the amount of NHS work they do."



Ministers are looking to recruit 1,000 more dentists by October