New statistics claim an eight-year attendance low
Survey reports a decline in dental patient numbers

D ental attendance figures are in the spotlight again after a new survey claims that the number of patients visiting the dentist has hit an eight-year low.

The survey, conducted by YouGov on behalf of Denplan, asserts that the number of people who say they attend their dental practice every six months has dropped from three in five, to barely two in five people in just one year (from 59 per cent to 45 per cent), statistics show. Meanwhile the numbers of people who visit the dentist regularly are down to their lowest figure since 2001 (to 69 per cent).

The research, which was carried out as an online survey, looked into some of the reasons given for not attending a dentist, with finances being the biggest reason. More than 40 per cent of respondents said they couldn't afford to go, with dental phobia (28 per cent) and lack of access (25 per cent) the next most given reasons.

Interestingly, it is reported that women are finding it hardest to prioritise their check-ups, with almost half saying they don't have the funds to go (48 per cent) compared with just over a third of men (36 per cent).

Denplan’s CDO Roger Matthews, said: “It is clear that patients are finding cost an issue in the current economic climate. While this may not be a surprise, it is important that the dental team focuses on retaining their patients by offering a range of payment options. Our own internal research indicates that those patients using a payment plan are least likely to cancel or delay routine dental check-ups, while they provide the practice the peace of mind from a regular form of income.”

However, these figures go against the published Information Centre governmental figures, which report a regular increase in attendances over the last 15 months. Chief Dental Officer for England, Barry Cockcroft said: “We have invested more than £2bn in NHS dentistry resulting in more NHS dental practices expanding and opening all the time.

A spokesperson for the British Dental Association commented: “Regular visits to the dentist are important to maintaining good oral health. As well as looking out for conditions such as dental decay and gum disease, dentists can also spot oral cancers, potentially saving a patient’s life. It’s really not a good idea for patients to avoid check-ups.

“Patients with concerns about locating an NHS dentist or charges should seek advice from NHS Direct. And there’s really no need for patients to be anxious. Dentists work hard to put patients at their ease, explaining the care they provide to provide the best possible experience.”

February 8-14, 2010 Vol. 4 No. 4