Kid’s hospital dental treatment ‘worrying’

Researchers have called the rise in the number of children having dental treatment in hospital ‘worrying’.

Nearly 50,000 children a year attend hospital to have teeth pulled out or be treated for dental decay, an analysis of hospital data has shown.

Researchers who analysed hospital data in Plymouth’s Peninsula Dental School called it ‘worrying’ that the number of under-17s hospitalised for dental treatment had been rising since 1997.

The findings, which were published in the British Dental Journal, revealed that children from poor areas were twice as likely to need treatment as those from more affluent families.

The figures showed there were 517,885 individual courses of dental treatment in NHS hospitals for children up to the age of 17 between 1997 and 2006.

The total number of children needing treatment was 470,115 and 80 per cent of admissions involved tooth extraction - in two-thirds of cases because of tooth decay.

The peak age for children needing teeth taken out was five.

Professor David Mole, who led the study, said yearly rises in hospital admissions had come despite rates of tooth decay and infection remaining steady.

The reasons for this would have to be identified ‘in order to cut the number of admissions, improve dental care for children and ultimately reduce the financial burden to the NHS’, he said.

The study found that children from poorer backgrounds were particularly at risk, being twice as likely to need treatment as those from more affluent areas.

Dr Paul Ashley, head of paediatric dentistry at University College London’s Eastman Dental Institute, the second author of the study, said: ‘Two aspects of the study are particularly worrying - the rise in the number of general anaesthetics being given to children, and the widening gulf in dental health between social classes."

He said general anaesthetics could be fatal to children.

The researchers wrote: ‘Caries (tooth decay) is a preventable disease yet the number of children being admitted for elective extractions of teeth due to caries was increasing yearly.

Further investigation to determine some of the underlying reasons for this trend is required.’

Peter Bateman, chair of the British Dental Association’s (BDA) Salaried Dentists Committee, called on water fluoridation to be used to address the gulf that has developed between the social classes.

He said: ‘This research highlights the stark inequalities in the oral health of England’s children. Those from socially deprived backgrounds are far more likely to have undergone extractions under general anaesthetic than their peers from more affluent backgrounds.

The reasons for the apparent trends in this period are not clear and require, as the authors of the study acknowledge, further investigation.

He added: ‘What is clear though is that dental caries is a preventable disease and it is a tragedy that social class remains such an accurate predictor of oral health.

Water fluoridation, as the long-standing scheme in the West Midlands illustrates, has great potential to address this divide. The BDA was pleased to see the successful outcome of the consultation on the introduction of such a scheme in Southampton earlier this year and would like to see local people in other areas of the country given the same choice.’

The Department of Health claimed the findings have been affected by changes brought in in 2001 which means that anaesthesia is now given in hospitals - rather than dental surgeries - for safety reasons.

A spokesman claimed that ‘there has been no increase in tooth decay in the period covered, which pre-dates the new dental contract.

He added: ‘Preventative oral healthcare has actually improved substantially thanks to the new dental contract.’