Survey reveals good oral health for five year old children in England

Statistics published today by the new NHS Dental Epidemiology Programme (NHS DEP) for England provide a snapshot of the oral health of five-year-old children. The report *NHS Dental Epidemiology Programme for England; Oral Health Survey of five year old children, 2007/2008* reveals that 69% of five-year-old children are free of obvious dental decay (i.e. have no decayed, missing [due to decay] or filled teeth).

The survey included the examination of nearly 140,000 five-year-old children from state schools across 147 of the 152 Primary Care Trust (PCT) areas of England during the 2007/08 academic year.

This is the first survey of this type where parents of children were required to give consent and therefore bias resulting from non-response cannot be ruled out. As a result, direct comparisons with previous surveys should not be made.

Key findings from the survey include:

- Three out of ten (31%) five-year-olds in England have obvious dental decay (at least one decayed, missing [due to decay] or filled tooth).
- Those children affected by decay have on average between three and four teeth which are either filled, extracted or have obvious lesions in them.
- Levels of decay vary regionally, with more children in the northern regions having experienced decay than those in southern and eastern regions. Across Strategic Health Authority (SHAs) areas the level of dental decay varies from 24% in South East Coast to 40% in the North East.
- There is also variation in obvious dental decay between local PCT areas; over half of five-year-olds in Middlesbrough (53%) had at least one tooth that was decayed, missing or filled, three times the proportion in East Riding of Yorkshire (18%).
- Five-year-old children in England have an average of 1.11 decayed, missing or filled teeth ($d_{3mft}$). At SHA level the highest average $d_{3mft}$ is seen in the North West (1.52), closely followed by Yorkshire and the Humber (1.51). The lowest average $d_{3mft}$ is seen in South East Coast (0.72).
• There are large variations in average $d_{3mft}$ across PCT areas, with the highest value seen in Brent (2.50) - some five times higher than that in West Kent (0.48).

• Decayed teeth make up the largest component of the $d_{3mft}$ value. On average, five-year-old children in England have 0.87 decayed teeth. The highest average number of decayed teeth was seen in the North West (1.21), over twice as high as that in South East Coast (0.52). Wide variation was also seen across PCTs with the highest value (2.24, Brent) being over seven times higher than the lowest value (0.30, West Kent).

Commenting on the results Deputy Chief Dental Officer for England, Sue Gregory said “We are pleased to see that most five year olds don’t suffer the effects of obvious tooth decay, and by the age of twelve our children’s teeth are among the healthiest in Europe. We need to sustain and improve on this position. Dental decay is preventable and we need to focus on programmes which will ensure that in future all young children benefit from good oral health. Brushing for Life already gives free toothbrushes, fluoride toothpaste and advice to children in areas where tooth decay is a problem and we are advising dentists to give all children over the age of three applications of fluoride varnish every six months to protect their teeth. We’re also looking at ways to deliver more dental services in the community to continue the improvements we’ve made on access to dentistry.”

The NHS Dental Epidemiology Programme for England (NHS DEP) has been developed by The Dental Observatory (TDO) and the North West Public Health Observatory (NWPHO) in conjunction with the Department of Health (DH) and other key stakeholders. The programme includes a series of national coordinated surveys of child oral health. It is anticipated that the information produced from the surveys will be utilised by the NHS in developing local, regional and national strategies to improve the oral health of children.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

- The survey was conducted as part of the NHS Dental Epidemiology Programme (NHS DEP) for England.
- Data was collected by trained and calibrated examiners using a standard protocol working to the British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry (BASCD) quality standards.
- This is the first survey of this type where parents of children were required to give consent and therefore bias resulting from non-response cannot be ruled out. As a result, direct comparisons with previous surveys should not be made. Non-respondents were more likely to be from deprived areas, where there is a tendency for children to have higher levels of dental decay. Data was weighted to take this into account, but it may be that non-respondents had different levels of dental decay over and above that which may be explained by deprivation alone.
- The North West Public Health Observatory (www.nwpho.org.uk) provides information and intelligence relevant to the population of the North West region and is based at the Centre for Public Health (www.cph.org.uk), Liverpool John Moores University. The Centre for Public Health specialises in applied research which address health issues, from policy development to service delivery.
- The summary report and full data tables by PCT, Local Authority, Strategic Health Authority and Government Office Region are available at www.nwph.net/dentalhealth