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EU health report outlines dental market challenges



■ A new report on the state of health-care in the EU has found that workforce shortages and an ageing population are contributing to a “shifting balance” between the demand and supply of health services on the continent. Published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and European Commission, the report underscores significant inequities in dental care access across EU countries, shaped by factors such as income inequality and public insurance coverage. The findings call for a balanced focus on equitable funding, strategic dentist distribution and preventive care initiatives.

The report, *Health at a Glance: Europe 2024*, that examines the major challenges facing European health systems in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, found that the number of dentists varies widely across EU countries, ranging from 0.5 to 1.3 dentists per 1,000 inhabitants. Greece, Cyprus, Portugal, Bulgaria and Romania had the highest per capita numbers, although figures for Greece and Portugal may be inflated, as they include all licensed dentists (i.e. also those who have retired or emigrated, for example). Across the EU, dentist availability was found to have grown modestly, from 0.7 in 2010 to 0.8 in 2022, except in Denmark, where a decline was observed.

EU residents averaged 1.2 dental visits annually in 2022, the number of consultations varying significantly, from 0.3 in Romania to 3.3 in the Netherlands. The low utilisation in Romania, despite high dentist availability, reflects limited public funding and high out-of-pocket costs, pushing many residents to forgo oral care. Public funding accounts for just 7% of dental spending in Romania, compared with 65% in France and Germany.

Conversely, the Netherlands, despite dental care not being comprehensively covered for adults, achieved a high consultation rate owing to prevention-focused education programmes, such as the nationally acclaimed “Hou je mond gezond!” initiative, which fosters early awareness and routine care in children. Croatia was also observed to exemplify effective early oral health promotion, highlighting the role of systemic efforts in improving dental health outcomes.

Despite dental health being a critical component of overall well-being, the report found that 6% of individuals needing dental care in 2023 reported unmet needs, rising to over 12% among populations at risk of poverty. Furthermore, unmet needs for dental care were found to be greater than those for medical care, owing to dental fees being excluded or only partially covered by public health schemes. “In 2023, more than 8% of people in Greece, Latvia, Portugal and Denmark reported unmet needs for dental care for reasons related to the organisation and functioning of healthcare services, mainly for financial reasons,” the report authors wrote.

“Europe finds itself at a pivotal moment in the evolution of health systems across the continent,” the authors said, adding that the health landscape is undergoing rapid change. Ageing populations, declining birth rates and workforce shortages are straining European health and long-term care services. At the same time, technological advances, such as artificial intelligence and digital health tools, are offering promise but raising equity concerns. The report points out that climate change is exacerbating health risks and resulting in a more urgent need for resilient and sustainable health-care delivery. ◀