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Dentistry has a long history and has changed a lot over time.

Key points:

- Ancient times: Early people drilled teeth over 9,000 years ago (University of Bologna, 2015).
- Ancient Egypt: Hesy-Re (2600 BC) is the first known dentist (Ring, 2018).
- Middle Ages: Barber-surgeons pulled teeth before dentistry became a profession.
- 18th century: Pierre Fauchard wrote *Le Chirurgien Dentiste* (1728), starting modern dentistry (Ring, 2018).
- 19th–20th century: Dental drills, anaesthesia, and X-rays made treatment easier and safer.
- Today: Modern dentistry uses digital scans, 3D printing, and laser treatments (American Dental Association, 2024).

Dentistry went from being very basic to highly scientific, helping people keep teeth healthy and fix problems more safely than ever before.

Modern dental services operate through both public and private healthcare systems:

- The National Health Service (NHS) – offering subsidised treatment for essential care.
- Private dental practices – providing advanced, cosmetic, or elective treatments (NHS, 2024).

Core services provided include:

- Routine check-ups and oral health assessments.
- Restorative treatments such as fillings, crowns, and bridges.
- Orthodontic procedures and cosmetic treatments.
- Oral surgery and emergency interventions.



Challenges faced in dentistry include – in some rural or low-income areas, there are very few dentists or long waiting times, called “dental deserts” (NHS, 2024). Cost of private care can be high, so some people delay treatment because it’s hard to get an NHS appointment.

These problems mean oral health isn’t equal for everyone. The World Health Organization (2023) says this reflects wider social inequality, affecting overall health, confidence, and quality of life.

Secondly, Staff Shortages and Burnout. Many dentists leave NHS work because of stress, long hours, and heavy paperwork

Dentistry is a vital part of healthcare that focuses on the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of conditions affecting the **teeth, gums, mouth, and jaw** (World Health Organization, 2023).

Dental professionals, including dentists, hygienists, dental nurses, and technicians, work together to improve and maintain oral health, which is a key component of general wellbeing.

Key functions of dentistry include:

- **Preventive care:** Check-ups, scaling, fluoride treatments, and patient education to avoid disease.
- **Restorative care:** Fillings, crowns, bridges, and implants that repair or replace damaged teeth.
- **Cosmetic treatments:** Teeth whitening, veneers, and orthodontics to enhance appearance.
- **Emergency care:** Managing dental pain, infections, and trauma.

Good oral health supports speech, nutrition, confidence, and quality of life. Untreated oral disease can lead to pain, tooth loss, and even systemic health problems like heart disease and diabetes (British Dental Journal, 2022).

Dentistry today extends beyond clinical treatment to include public health education, encouraging communities to adopt healthier oral hygiene habits through diet and preventive care campaigns.

Specialised branches of dentistry include:

- Orthodontics – correction of teeth and jaw alignment.
- Periodontics – management of gum diseases.
- Endodontics – treatment of root canal infections.
- Prosthodontics – design and fitting of artificial teeth.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, infection control has become a key focus. Dental teams now follow strict sterilisation protocols, use personal protective equipment (PPE), and ensure air filtration and ventilation meet health standards (Public Health England, 2021).

The Origins and Structure of the National Health Service (NHS)

Origins of the NHS

The National Health Service (NHS) officially began on 5 July 1948, representing a major change in the way healthcare was delivered in the UK. Before this, access to medical services was often limited to those who could pay, with care provided by private doctors, voluntary hospitals, or local councils. The foundation for the NHS was laid by the 1942 Beveridge Report, written by Sir William Beveridge. This report aimed to tackle the “five giants” affecting society: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness. Disease was highlighted as a critical problem that required a comprehensive and accessible healthcare system for all (Beveridge, 1942).

Aneurin Bevan, who was Minister of Health at the time, was the driving force behind the NHS. He was inspired by the Tredegar Workmen's Medical Aid Society in South Wales, which offered free healthcare to its members through contributions from workers. Bevan's vision was to create a system where healthcare was free at the point of use for everyone, regardless of income, ensuring that no one would avoid medical treatment because of cost. The National Health Service Act 1946 made this vision law, leading to the creation of the NHS in England and Wales.

Key Principles of the NHS

The NHS was built around **several key ideas**:

- **Universality:** Services are available to all residents of the UK.
- **Comprehensiveness:** The NHS provides a broad range of care, including GP services, hospitals, dental care, and mental health support.
 - Free at the point of use: Patients do not pay when receiving treatment; it is funded through taxes.
- **Equity:** Everyone should receive the same standard of care, regardless of social or financial status.
- **Accountability:** As a publicly funded service, the NHS is answerable to the government and the public.

These principles were revolutionary at the time, ensuring that healthcare became a right rather than a privilege.

Current Structure and Functioning

Today, the NHS in England is a large and complex organisation. Its structure includes:

- NHS England, which oversees service delivery and sets priorities.
- Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), which bring together NHS bodies and local councils to plan services according to local needs.
- NHS Trusts and Foundation Trusts, which run hospitals and other healthcare facilities.
- Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), previously responsible for planning and commissioning services (now mostly replaced by ICSs).
- General Practitioners (GPs), who are usually the first point of contact for patients and coordinate referrals.

Recent changes in 2025 led to a significant restructuring, cutting NHS England's workforce by almost half to improve efficiency and reduce overlap with the Department of Health and Social Care (The Guardian, 2025). This demonstrates the ongoing need to adapt the NHS to modern challenges.

Challenges and Critical Perspective

While the NHS remains a cornerstone of British society, it faces several issues. Funding pressures are significant due to rising costs and an ageing population, which put stress on hospitals and other services. Workforce shortages, including doctors and nurses, affect patient care and lead to longer waiting times. Access to services can be inconsistent, and health inequalities remain, with some groups experiencing poorer outcomes despite the NHS's commitment to equity (Reuters, 2024).

Reforms continue to be introduced to make the NHS more efficient and responsive, such as integrating care more closely at the local level and reducing bureaucracy, while maintaining its founding principles.

Conclusion

The creation of the NHS was a transformative moment in UK history, making healthcare free, fair, and accessible for all. Today, despite facing financial and staffing pressures, it continues to provide essential services and remains a symbol of social justice. Continuous reforms are essential to ensure the NHS can meet future challenges while upholding the principles it was founded on.

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