

Dental programme being delivered to our children falls way short of what is needed

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THE giant Halloween haul of sweets freaks me out, because all I see is tooth decay. I tell the kids you only get one set of gnashers, but they don't listen, which is why I surreptitiously chuck out half their stash.

But sweets taste good, and kids will over-indulge at Halloween, and sure, it's a celebration – but the treats are never-ending. Already the selection boxes – three for a fiver – have invaded the supermarket shelves.

I know it's the parents' responsibility to stem this tide of sugar, but it's difficult.

That said, regular dentist trips do help. You have an impartial adult explaining why, and how, you should brush your teeth, but many children don't get to see the dentist regularly because our school dental programme is broken.

In 1994, the dental health action plan advised three dental screenings before the age of 12 – in second, fourth and sixth class.

I was unaware of these until last year when my child was in first year and I got a letter calling him for a check-up with a HSE dentist.

A competent and friendly professional a short Luas trip away cleaned and polished his teeth and had him back reclining in the chair six days later for a filling.

I was pleased with this service. The dentist we go to is a paediatric one (I'll explain why later).

I commented how handy it would

be if my primary school kids got similar treatment, and the HSE dentist explained this was my son's sixth-class check-up, which was a year late because of Covid.

Yet there was no pandemic to blame for the other visits he missed when he was in earlier classes not happening. This was down to a lack of resources.

But how short-sighted to not seriously start tackling this long-running understaffing.

Potential problems could be nipped in the bud if kids got these check-ups. Prevention means less trauma and less cost.

In 2017, researchers at University College Cork (UCC) studied dental records of 350 children under five, starting from 2000, and tracking their progress until 13.

They focused on schools in disadvantaged areas and found the cost of treating children with bad teeth – an average €819 each – could cost eight times a preventive programme.

These school checks not happening are a disaster for many as kids are reliant on parents to bring them to the dentist. But not every parent has the funds – and not every parent sees such check-ups as a priority.

Having appointments would nudge parents who may not get around to it, and for kids who may be reluctant to go, hearing that their friends are getting their teeth checked would normalise it.

There is HSE emergency care for children, but not doing the regular checks and only stepping in at the painful stage seems absurd.

Parents want the best for their children, but we need constant reminders about appropriate foods.

A dentist trip is a good refresher course; it's easy to wrongly assume many snacks are semi-healthy, with research from watchdog Safefood last month revealing a fifth of calorie

intake for children aged two to four was from things such as biscuits, chocolate, savoury snacks and soft drinks.

Primary school kids got a quarter of their energy from these foods.

It is easy to find yourself in a situ-

ation where tooth decay happens. I was ashamed four years ago when one of my kids got three metal caps. We had missed a check-up in the chaos of moving back to Ireland. The dentist we went to sent us straight to the specialist, as with one of my kids some of their permanent teeth had come up bad.

There was an enamel issue, but the decay was preventable. I felt dreadful. It also cost €3,000. I did visit a helpful HSE emergency care dentist for a second opinion, but they told me they could only yank them out, and if it was their child they would get the caps.

Maybe if there was a dentist check at the start of the school year, the problem could have been spotted in time. The lack of school check-ups is something Irish Dental Association chief executive Fintan Hourihan has been vocal about for years.

"I don't understand why the collapse in public dental services for children is not getting more attention. It has slowly eroded and perhaps people have not noticed," he told me.

"Nobody gets it before sixth class. Some places are worse – in Offaly, it was often second year and in Laois fourth year.

"The HSE dental school service is a safety net, regardless of your means – a way of picking up problems early. By not carrying out these checks, many children will slip through the net, with the economically disadvantaged affected most."

He referenced studies done in Cork and Dublin that showed four out of 10 primary-school pupils had decay in their permanent teeth.

Mr Hourihan added that the HSE dentist service does not provide endless free treatment, but it aids

prevention as it identifies problems earlier. He would recommend to start this process at pre-school. This would also get parents onside earlier. It's effective to speak directly to them, to drum home that cavities are avoidable.

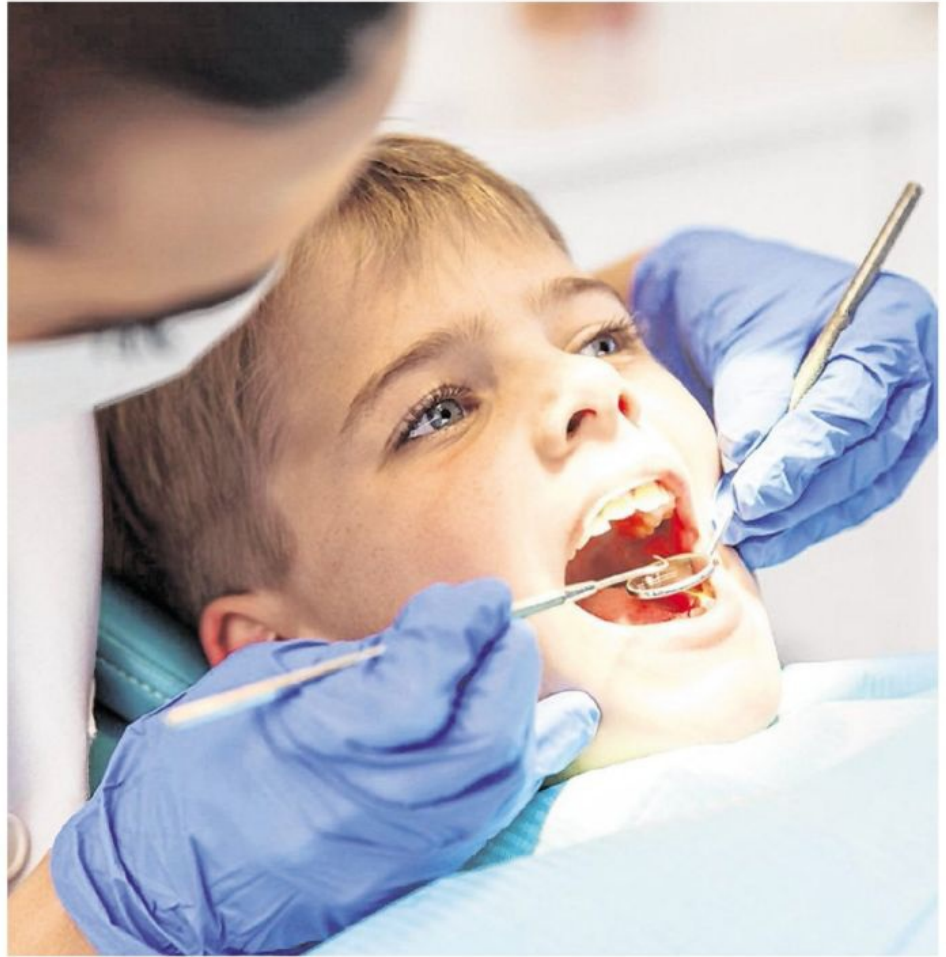
Mr Hourihan said the scheme for adults is also collapsing, so some of the HSE services allocated for children are being used here.

He welcomed extra funds in the budget, but said dental care was slashed in 2010, and the once-off allocation of €9m will do little to clear oral health backlogs and long waiting lists for orthodontists.

I have yet to be stung by braces. I hear of extortionate amounts of money being handed over for them. They're expensive services to provide, but if we're not going to have an adequate free system, then at least give more tax relief to dental patients.

The school dental programme is in big trouble and without enough dentists it will not be easy to fix. It needs to go to the very top of the health agenda, because what we have is completely rotten.

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Check-up: A dentist examines a young patient's teeth – many Irish children are missing out due to lack of resources.

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