

CED STATEMENT

CORPORATE DENTISTRY AND THE DENTAL PROFESSION

Introduction:

The Council of European Dentists (CED) is a European not-for-profit association which represents over 340,000 dentists across Europe. The association was established in 1961 and is now composed of 33 national dental associations from 31 European countries.

Corporate dentistry¹ has been on the rise in Europe and is likely going to remain a reality among many European countries. As such, with this document, the CED wishes to outline its stance on corporate dentistry and its core principles in relation to the current and future corporate dentistry status quo. While the CED recognizes and acknowledges that corporate model of dentistry will remain present in the field of the dental profession, the CED constantly highlights that delivery of oral health services, regardless of its organizational form, has to be subjected to high ethical and professional standards, to ensure that financial profit is not working against patients' care and health, and against the professional wellbeing of dentists.

Corporate Dentistry in Europe:

In the last few years, the CED conducted two surveys on corporate dentistry among its members (one in 2018 and one in 2022). The comparative analysis among the two surveys demonstrates an increased trend in non-dentists owning a dental practice, along with a stable trend of presence of corporate chains among European countries. Furthermore, the 2022 survey respondents report an increase in the percentage of dentists working for chains since 2018 - the year of the first survey.

Corporate dentistry is an issue that is closely related to dental demographics and workforce challenges. More and more CED members report a noticeable trend of younger dentists choosing to refrain from opening their own, private practices. In addition to that, across European countries there are significant discrepancies among rural and urban territories, with populations based in smaller, economically poorer regions frequently lacking proper dental care.

It is usually indicated that the reasons for young dentists to join a corporate dental facility are improved balance between personal and professional life, less focus on the administrative burdens of managing and maintaining a private practice and no requirement for capital outlay and financial risks of running one's own business. However, working in a corporate dental facility may also come with potential challenges, such as pressure to meet treatment targets (e.g., a certain number of treatments per day to achieve financial objectives), limited autonomy in clinical decision-making, and other employment-related concerns that could influence the professional satisfaction and growth of a young dental professional.

Over-regulation of the dental profession is becoming an issue that contributes to the rise in corporate dentistry. The management of a dental office, due to the demanding regulatory requirements, is an increasingly complex, time-consuming and highly responsible task. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, (EU) 2016/679) and, in some cases, Medical Devices Regulation (MDR, (EU) 2017/745) have increased the burden of managing a dental practice. Further effects on the dental practices' administrative burden will likely take place with newer legislation such as the European Health Data Space (EHDS, COM/2022/197 final). National

¹ Defined in the CED Resolution on Corporate Dentistry in Europe as “*organisations that usually set up dental offices in a number of locations, which can be in the same country or across different countries, recruit and engage dentists and are usually run by investment companies*”.

legislation often creates further over-regulation. Small dental practices (those that qualify as small and micro enterprises²) lack the resources to tackle this burden. This increasingly leads the owners to sell their practices to big dental chains, as well as deters young dentists from starting their own practices. Fewer practices means less choice and access.

Although recently there have been reports from some European countries about corporate dental chains being connected to issues of patient mistreatment, false advertising, over- and under-treatment, in some instances dental chains could nevertheless bring health benefits – e.g., by being present in rural and less populated areas, opening up the possibility for the local population to receive more regular treatment. This is not always the case and is highly dependent on the national situation – e.g., in some countries, big corporate chains in fact do not wish to extend their presence in rural areas due to the lower profit potential.

Main CED principles:

- **The dentist must be in the center of decision-making and management of corporate practices** – optimally, only a dentist should be allowed to establish and operate such practices and where the national legislation allows non-professionals to own dental settings, at least the clinical management and decision-making should be in the hands of dentists. Furthermore, decisions on management and functioning of such entities should be based on majority vote by dentists within the practice. This is also important in terms of patients' trust, signaling to them that they are placing their oral health needs within an entity that is guided and headed by highly qualified healthcare professionals and their code of ethics.
- **Young dentists have to be educated on the implications of choosing a corporate chain versus private practice** for their day-to-day work life and professional development – national associations and other relevant bodies must ensure that there is enough awareness among young dentists and dental graduates as to their rights and responsibilities working in dental chains but also in cases when they face mistreatment and violations of their work conditions. In particular, they have to realize that a dentist is always bound by the rules of professional ethics and it is the dentist's duty to defend his/her clinical independence and to take decisions based on the medical needs of the patient.
- **Corporate chains should be subject to the same rules and obligations of professional law that individual dentists comply with.** Dental associations and chambers must be empowered to address such issues directly, either by having the competence to supervise corporate practices and, when needed, to commence disciplinary actions or by being entitled to effectively report such cases to other competent regulatory authorities. Corporate chains must be investigated immediately by competent authorities in cases when 1) mistreatment is reported by patients and 2) when they are advertising their services through unrealistic and false claims.

² European Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003 concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, section Annex, Article 2): '(...) a small enterprise is defined as an enterprise which employs fewer than 50 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 10 million., (...) a microenterprise is defined as an enterprise which employs fewer than 10 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 2 million.' <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2003:124:0036:0041:en:PDF#:~:text=The%20category%20of%20micro%2C%20small,not%20%20exceeding%20EUR%2043%20million.>

- **Dentists working in corporate chains must be empowered and enabled to follow dentistry's ethics and professional autonomy rules and laws.** They must not be expected to place financial profit above the interest and health of their patients, and must be able to seek protection and guidance through the national dental associations and chambers when such situations arise. They must also **seek protection and justice in cases when they became subjects of employer malpractice and mistreatment** – this includes situations of unrealistic work hours, unclear employment status, being forced to deliver treatment based on financial quotas, unsafe working environments and subpar work conditions. For example, young dentists should consider having their own professional liability insurance, even if it is not legally required for dentists working in chains – and national dental chambers and associations are usually able to offer collective insurances for their members.
- **Diversity in practicing the dental profession and for patients' choice must be encouraged and preserved** – it is therefore important to recognize the need to adhere to the relevant legislation and professional ethics across all types of dental practices, from the small individual one to the big corporate chain. **This must be based on the relevant national situation and professional law of each individual country.** The reason for this is two-fold: 1) to ensure that all dentists can perform based on the same high ethical and professional standards, choosing the type of practice to do so in and 2) to allow each patient to seek and obtain treatment and care for their oral health wherever they choose.
- **Over-regulation at EU and national level must be tackled** – it must be ensured that the regulatory environment remains habitable, especially for dental practices that qualify as small and medium enterprises. Introducing and implementing new legislation, both at the EU and at the national level, has to take into consideration such practices and their ability to compete.

Conclusion:

Corporate model of dentistry is becoming more and more prominent among European countries. As such, it is crucial to ensure that the dental profession is fully involved and in charge of this sector, being empowered and having ownership of the management and ethical aspects of corporate practices. At its core, corporate dental practices must ensure that they are serving their patients as well as looking after the wellbeing of their workforce.

Furthermore, it is important to ensure that corporate chains bring benefits for public dental health ideally both in rural and urban areas. They have a duty to deliver high quality comprehensive oral health services, not just limiting them to those which bring better profits.

Corporates should be regulated to prevent malpractice and financial benefit at the expense of the dentists and of the patients based on the existing, sound and robust ethical and moral values that the dental profession operates under while ensuring transparency regarding their ownership structures.

-ENDS-

Adopted at the CED General Meeting in November 2024.