What supports (or inhibits) the use of Dental Therapists in dentistry?

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Background & Aim
Studies across the health service reveal benefits of developing skill-mix.\(^1,2\) We have yet to establish how to optimise the skills of the dental therapist (DT) within the dental team to achieve best service delivery. Adopting a realist approach,\(^3\) in this study funded by Health and Care Research Wales we used research literature on dental therapists to build theory about what works, why, for whom and in what circumstance.

Method
We derived our theory from a structured review of the literature. Following the realist approach, 79 papers were double coded (by at least two team members) for high-level factors (enablers, inhibitors, both) describing the conditions or context (C) under which the mechanisms (M) operate to produce desired outcomes (O).

What facilitates skill-mix?

Theories
Ensuring therapists are appropriately trained enhances trust, confidence and patient safety
The practice having an appropriate referral system which means DTs get relevant and varied cases
A payment system focused on prevention supports employment of DTs by facilitating the business case

What does skill-mix facilitate?

Impact
Macro (population and system) level
System efficiency savings
Improved patient access
Oral health improvements
Erosion of professional identity

Micro (individual) & Meso (practice) level
Enhanced productivity
Enhanced patient safety
Additional patient visits needed

Conclusion
Our analysis provides theory about the context and mechanisms needed to facilitate the work of dental therapists and about what outcomes dental therapists facilitate. CMO theories are currently being tested in a set of dental practices.

References
2. Dyer TA et al. What matters to patients when their care is delegated to dental therapists? *BJD* 2013; 214: E17