

Newsfeature

Are you In Front with NHS contract reform?

Sophie Bracken attended **Denplan's** In Front Seminar in Chelmsford to get the measure of the upcoming NHS dental contract reforms

As a dental professional you will be acutely aware that changes to the NHS dental contract are on the horizon – but are you aware of what those changes entail? Forewarned is forearmed, yet NHS contract changes are shrouded in uncertainty and clouded by speculation.

For this reason, Denplan has been running a series of seminars intended to provide the most current information to prepare dental professionals for what's to come regarding their NHS contract. The plan provider is inviting both Denplan members and non-members to attend its In Front (If) Seminars free of charge, to help the dental team stay informed and in control in this uncertain time.

Dentistry attended the If Seminar in Chelmsford in May, to see first-hand how these evening events can help the dental team make informed decisions on upcoming NHS contract changes, whether their practice is a Denplan member, a mixed practice or 100% NHS.

Eye-opening

The evening entailed a hot buffet dinner and a chance for attendees to mingle with peers, followed by talks from Roger Matthews, Denplan's former chief dental officer; and Raj Rattan, GDP and senior dento-legal consultant at DPL.

'Something has shifted in the professional consciousness over the last year where perhaps people are getting fed up with what seems like a prolonged wait for change', Roger told *Dentistry*, explaining how the If Seminars came about.

'It's almost a perfect storm. Patients want more, patients expect more, patients are more likely to express concerns and complaints than ever before, costs are rising, payments are being held back, dentists want to provide the best for their patients and the unsung majority are beginning to think, perhaps I need to think about where I'm going.'

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'The idea of the seminars is to look at what we know of the future of the NHS contract system over the next few years, running from the prototypes into the fully reformed contract, pulling together all the strands of information that we've got and providing that information without a bias in favour or against, but to point out the potential pitfalls and benefits of a reformed contract.'

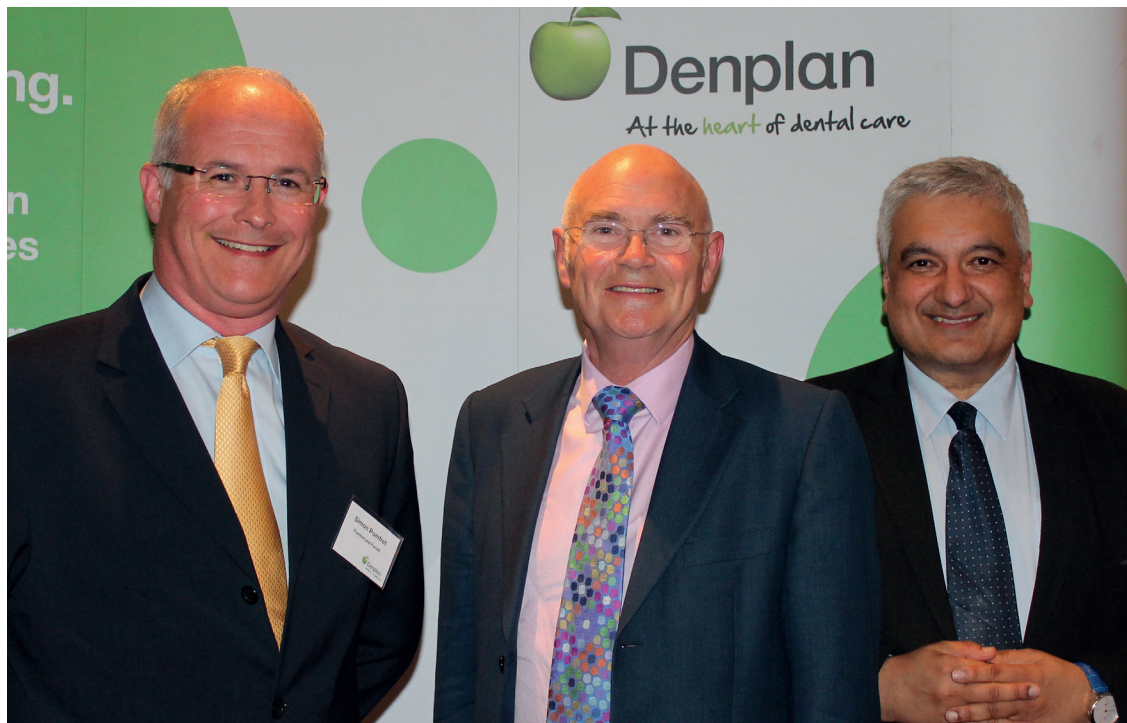
'Raj will look at the risks and benefits of working under an NHS arrangement. And that really is the intention of the evening – to give people some information so that they can go away and make informed decisions on how their practice should shape up for the future.'

What if...

As the ceremonies began at 7pm, Roger kicked things off with an overview of the current NHS contract since its introduction in 2006, moving on to an explanation of the structure of the old pilot system, the evaluation of the pilots in 2014, and the new prototype systems, the purpose of which, Roger said, are 'to represent a whole version of how the new system might work'.

During Roger's address, he ran through a number of 'if' scenarios that might arise as a result of the evaluation of the currently running prototype arrangements and the resulting dental contract, such as:

- What if the NHS budget shank over the next five years?
- What if the government clamps down on mixing?
- What if associates ceased to be regulated as self-employed?
- What if dental contracts were for a fixed period rather than open ended?



In Front Seminar Chelmsford speakers (L-R): Simon Pomfret, Roger Matthews and Raj Rattan

Managing the risks

Raj Rattan's presentation was entitled, 'Your practice, your choices', which aimed to give an overview of contract reform from a risk management perspective.

The core problem, Raj said, with current NHS dentistry is the three-point paradox of time, quality and money – if there is a constraint then one of these factors is likely to give way to the others. Money constraint in the system may lead to standards of care that are sub-optimal – resulting in a compromise said Raj.

Dentists whose business model is reliant on mixing private and NHS dentistry, Raj said, have to be mindful of inadvertent or unintended breaches of GDS contract clauses and GDC guidance because of the risk of allegations that patients may be misled about the quality of dentistry they might receive in either private or NHS practice.

The mixed practice business model and current contract are on a divergent path

He cited the Office of Fair Trading Report, discussed the implications of evidence from NHS Protect related to inappropriate claims and its impact on practices. To illustrate the risks, Raj gave examples of some dento-legal cases involving 'mixing' in molar endodontics and the referral of patients privately to a dental hygienist. The lack of clarity about what constitutes mandatory services and what treatment could be reasonably considered to fall within the advanced mandatory services contract was also discussed with audience participation.

The debate, said Raj, suggests the profession needs contract reform because the mixed practice business model and current contract are on a divergent path.

Looking forward, Raj pondered whether we will see a different pattern of dentistry emerging for the next generation. He spoke of the need to align contracting models with educational strategy if level one and two dentists are to be part of the future. 'The next generation of dentists may be working very differently. There are many unknowns and the uncertainty about the future direction of NHS dentistry and his experiences in dental foundation training suggested

Upcoming In Front Seminars:

- 22 June – Park Royal, Warrington
- 4 July – Cambridge Belfry
- 5 July – Leicester Marriott
- 18 July – Bournemouth Marriott.

To book please call 01962 828 026.

that this was a real concern amongst the recently qualified. He noted that some saw their future outside the NHS and others were frustrated by unrealistic or unachievable targets.

Raj concluded his session by saying that practitioners should critically review their own situation in relation to the current climate, and through a process of deduction and inductive reasoning, consider what options will best meet their needs and the needs of their patients.

Through the fog

Following Raj's presentation, local dentist Simon Pomfret talked over his experiences as a Denplan dentist, explaining why he took the path 'the other way' from NHS dentistry. The thrust of Simon's address surrounded the control Denplan afforded him over his clinical dentistry and his practice management, and the freedom it provided to enable him to expand his treatment offerings.

At the end of the session I asked Roger what he would like to see next from the government in terms of NHS dentistry. 'What dentists want above all is they want to know what the NHS is offering', he said. 'They want clarity over what the NHS can and will provide for patients. Successive CDOs and have been unwilling to make that statement. And that seems to be doing a disservice to patients because it fails to manage their expectations of what dentistry should be doing.'

While those in power remain tight-lipped on what the next NHS contract will entail, it's hoped that attendees to the If Seminars have gained some clarity on the potential scenarios that await them when the prototype arrangements have been evaluated and the new dental contract is enforced in around five years' time. Until then, keeping informed on the likely scenarios is the best method of preparation. **D**

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