

**Advance Notice – Congestion Ahead**  
**Roger Matthews**

Further confirmation came this week (as I write, mid-November) that the path to a new dental contract is being laid out. In contrast to the last administration who seemed to have a cloak and dagger approach to keeping the outside world informed, the Coalition seems intent on setting out a timetable well in advance.

The announcement came in the annual update: *Business Plan 2011–2015* for the Department of Health, with a commitment to “consult on the new dental contract” in July 2012.

This date fits nicely with the abolition of PCTs by April 2013 and the introduction of a new, nationally commissioned New (New) Contract (which just leaves time nicely for a one year pilot programme to be announced in December of this year and probably commencing in April 2011).

Further commitments are contained in objectives that the Department will no longer support, such as: “micromanaging the NHS through the use of central process targets with no clinical justification”. That will be the end of UDAs then, I guess.

Neither will DH in future: “demand burdensome and unnecessary data”. That role will obviously now be passed to the Care Quality Commission, whose role will be “strengthened” in the Plan.

The document goes on to reveal that spending on administration within the Department will reduce from £5.1 billion on 2010/11 to £3.7 billion by 2014/15, a whopping 27.5% cut in admin costs that, together with reduced capital spending will ensure the political promise of more real-terms money going into frontline services.

You will be relieved to hear that there will be no more uncertainty caused by constantly changing strategies. Instead, as announced in July’s White Paper, there will be one whopping great change which will possibly leave everyone reeling for some time to come.

It's clear that with Jimmy Steele closely involved, major changes are certainly under way in dentistry. In 2006 it was possible (though not always achievable) to give a guarantee to every dentist contractor that their gross fees would be maintained for the same volume of work during the transitional period to April 2009. This ensured that there was no scene redolent of the Titanic and lifeboats, and indeed money has been pumped into NHS dentistry like never before.

Consolidation into a national contract, with a preceding two year pay freeze, would seem to make such a scenario unlikely in 2013. There has already been some harmonisation of UDA values across PCT areas, but the standardisation that a country-wide tariff might introduce would make guarantees very difficult if not impossible.

Professor Steele suggested that a future contract based, spookily enough on registration capitation and quality, might attract a fee system which was calculated on the patient's age, deprivation and possibly regional indices. This would be achieved through an IT-based system where patient data would be keyed in at the practice and turned into monetary value at whatever-replaces-the-Business-Services-Authority (another future acronym to remember).

This will be a little akin to running a lottery ticket through the machine at your local newsagent. You enter the patient's postcode, the practice postcode and the patient's date of birth, and "pop" out comes a figure which is relatively unrelated to what you got paid last time you did an identical procedure.

On second thoughts, there is of course a precedent for this – I think the airlines call it "dynamic pricing". You check online and there is a flight to your chosen destination for £29.99. You phone a hotel and book and then go back to the airline to book the ticket. Sadly it has now gone up to £175.00.

I've probably got hold of the wrong end of the stick. But then, these days, nothing would surprise me.

[623 words]

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**Notes to Editors:**

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Roger joined Denplan in 1995 having spent 20 years working in general dental practice and as a dento-legal advisor for the Medical Defence Union. He oversees dental advice to the company and its links with professional bodies, and is responsible for Denplan's professional services.