

**APART FROM THAT, MRS LINCOLN, HOW WAS THE PLAY?
Roger Matthews**

The announcement of a further Review into NHS Dentistry prompts mixed emotions. On the one hand, perhaps it does indicate a willingness to consider modification to the present, almost universally disliked Contract.

On the other hand, everyone I meet fears that “A Review” is political-speak for “string along for another two or three years and then see if anyone remembers the original problem”.

There is an elephant in the room. Noticed it? I have waited for about 9 months for more widespread publication of the research commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government*, which at least had the courage to ask dentists what they actually thought of the current system (shock!), and patients (horror!) what they thought NHS dentistry was actually for.

As surveys go it was pretty thorough, and involved asking all NHS dentists in Wales for their views on the New Contract, immediately before its introduction; and then asking all those who responded for a follow up view (using the same question set) two years later. Nearly 60% responded to the first survey and almost 80% to the second. Good going.

I report, in summary, dentists’ views at January 2008.

- 11% of dentists had discontinued NHS provision since the New Contract was initiated. A further 24% had reduced their NHS commitment since April 2006.
- 26% thought they had flexibility in their working hours, only 16% thought there was less administration, and just 15% felt they were “their own boss”.
- 87% thought that the UDA system was a continuation of the ‘treadmill’ and only 7% agreed with the concept of the UDA system. 87% also thought that the treatment bands were ‘too wide’ and 75% agreed that the inability to charge for missed appointments had impacted on their practices.

- 60% reported that most patients wanted to continue with a 6 monthly recall, but only 16% believed that they were able to provide dentistry for those most in need. Just 3% felt that they had more time to spend with patients.
- 12% of dentists agreed that the new contract improved the quality of care provided to patients and just 3% felt that they had more time to spend on prevention.
- There was a marked difference between the “anticipated” advantages of the new contract and the “experienced” reports recorded after two years.

What more evidence do we need? And when will the English dentists, who outnumber their Welsh counterparts by more than 15 to 1, be given the opportunity to express their views in this way? Can we look forward to such an open consultation across the Shires and Wolds? Is there, in fact, any reason to suppose that dentists in England would respond any differently?

I have little doubt that the economic downturn is currently the greatest recruiting sergeant for the NHS. In doubtful economic times no-one would want to turn their backs on a guaranteed income stream and that is perfectly understandable.

The Welsh report concludes that: “With the exception of the removal of out of hours commitment, it is difficult to find an aspect of the new dental contract about which dental practitioners are enthusiastic”. Quite! I am sorry to disagree with the published official view of widespread enthusiasm, but this view – the view, moreover, of over 50% of NHS dentists in Wales – is the one that is also expressed to me across England too.

Apart from that, everything’s fine, thanks!

*Chestnutt I, Thomas D, Davies L et al (2008). Implementing the new dental contract – studies to inform the planning of NHS General Dental Services in Wales. Welsh Assembly Government.

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.