

CHINESE WHISPERS Roger Matthews

Given the customary delays between my quill-pen scratching the parchment and your copy of this Journal arriving, it is New Year as I write. But by now, the gym memberships, diet ambitions and other January resolutions will have gone the way of all such aspirations, I guess.

As you read this, though, it has just become officially the Year of the Ox in Chinese calendar terms, so perhaps we could all get a second go at improving our lot? The Chinese calendar is far, far older than our Gregorian “Johnny come lately” affair (it’s 4,706 this year in China) so maybe we could learn something from them?

About every 3 years, the Chinese year has a “leap month”, so given the current method of remuneration NHS dentists would get a bonus (as would Denplan dentists). On the other hand, the years are shorter, at 354 days, which is bad news when you’re getting on a bit.

It’s traditional to offer predictions at the turn of the year. Will the end of the Transition Period (three long Gregorian years) bring huge change? Well, yes and no. The Government has banged on about “no unilateral changes to a contract without consent”, but then again, it has also pointed out several times that “one thing that *will* change” is dentists’ income guarantee.

Quite how those two messages will be squared has yet to be revealed. Although there have been sporadic reports of “harmonisation” and “pressure”, the long-term outlook is uncertain, although the economic climate certainly won’t ease NHS budgets in the near future.

What will also change is the gradual, but unremitting move of health care towards a more “commercial” model. For as long as most of us can remember and for the most part, primary care dentistry has been about local corner-shop sized enterprises.

Now I believe we are moving more towards a “Tesco-and-supplier” relationship as the commissioners are able to exert ever more influence over the way dentists deliver services. Not necessarily a bad thing – some suppliers have made a fortune out of becoming preferred providers to the supermarket chains.

When you see a farmer on the TV, you instinctively think of wellies and overalls, but every so often one pops up in a smart suit with a shiny Range Rover (and even shinier wellies). Guess which one that is. But it can be a delicate balance, effectively serving just one super-customer. One strategic mind-change and it’s back to mucking out the pigs.

On the other hand, the corner shop is not yet dead – far from it (despite the credit crunch). It has moved into a niche position, catering often for a defined clientele, and offering a customised service. It enjoys more self-direction, is more customer-savvy. But that, too, takes concentration and effort.

Both worlds co-exist. Both have their adherents and detractors. But take heart: there is not as yet (nor foreseeably) a dental equivalent of amazon.com. But there again, there are no UDAs in Tesco.

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.