

## **Cooking the Books**

**Roger Matthews**

As I write (always the sure sign that the copy deadline is some time away from your reading this), news comes that Thomas Cook has written to hoteliers across Europe to inform them that they will be deducting 5% from accommodation payments made in arrears over the summer.

This is a little like your patient saying that they're knocking a couple of hundred off your bill for the implant retained bridge you fitted last week, despite having previously had a signed agreement and consent to the treatment and costs. Cook's statement that they have had 'great support' from hotel owners in response to this can be treated, I would guess, with some scepticism.

I well remember the story about a dentist who owed his lab a shed-load (technical term) in unpaid monthly fees. When the irate technician called him to account, he retorted that each month he put the unpaid bills into a hat and pulled out the first five. "If you continue to harass me", he added, "you will not participate in next month's draw!" Ah the good old days, eh?

Cook's action is, I would submit, without any legal precedent, and relies entirely on the 'School of Hard Knocks' proposition that 'you need us more than we need you'. And in time, I believe this will lead to an unpleasant outcome. The hotels may be unable to do much now in actuality, but in the longer term I am sure they will look elsewhere for their summer custom.

This behaviour is also a characteristic of the doctrine of 'bigger is better'. As centralisation increases (in the US, dental corporate bodies are called 'consolidators', which makes the point very clearly) so competition is reduced, and ultimately margins are squeezed.

Cook-type behaviour is also seen in the activities of Primary Care Trusts, where the need by a dental contractor to maintain a contract in volume may be seen as more important than suffering a decrease in UDA value. There have been a number of issues – and, it seems to me, there is currently something of an upsurge – where dentists are asked to comply with this or that additional requirement, whether it's a particular and detailed requirement under HTM 01-05, or that recall examinations are to be every 10 months (to comply with NICE 'Guidance').

Dentists are, of course, free to push back against such demands, where they are not contractually bound, but there is always the feeling that when (or if) any future money or contracts are available, they won't be at the head of the queue.

I also despair more than a little about the ethics of this activity. Ethics used to be a subject taught at the undergraduate level (forgive me if I have not yet discovered the dental school where this is still so). Nowadays, the subject is more likely to be called something like 'medico-legal studies' or 'practising responsibly'. At one time, ethics was even taught in some schools, by lecturers from the Philosophy Department – imagine that!

Ethics used to be about how one dealt with one's fellow men and women, whether they were patients, suppliers, employers or fellow practitioners. There was an unwritten code of conduct, but that is all old hat now. I am definitely sounding like a grumpy old man.

There is certainly more defensive dentistry about, and when, not unreasonably you might say, a dentist believes that they are not paranoid, but that nevertheless everyone is out to get them, it is hard to criticise that position.

The opposite of defensive dentistry is, of course, offensive dentistry, and there is more of that about too. Offensive dentistry consists largely of believing – and telling those who will listen – that one's dentistry is superior to that of another. Or, indeed, most others.

No-one wins in these situations, and patients are generally the losers. Similarly, there will be no winner when ethics is dumped in favour of bully-boy tactics, and holiday-makers will ultimately pay the price of cooking the books.

[665 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.