

FEES, CLAIMS AND EXPENSES

Roger Matthews

For what now seems like months, we have been bombarded with media reports of MPs and their expenses. Moat cleaning, duck islands and even 59p boxes of matches have figured unrelentingly, and public disapproval has turned to anger and fury.

No doubt the European elections, just a day or two away as I write, will be the watershed of despair for electorate and Government alike. The Minister for Dentistry has not escaped, as she and her MP husband have claimed mortgage expenses on both their home (a 30 minute underground ride from Westminster) and a Thames-side apartment.

As so often happens in such campaigns, the majority of MPs who have legitimately claimed for expenses “wholly and necessarily” in connection with their work, has been swept aside in the media lynch-mob.

And significantly, many of those put on front-page trial by journalists (some of whom are not themselves averse to a bit of expense-claiming) have defended themselves by stating that the complex and elaborate “green book” of MPs’ allowances, and the Parliamentary Fees Office itself, has approved or legitimised their expenditure.

When a system becomes so entrenched, complex and overwhelming – whatever system that may be – it is always tempting for those working under its shadow to use it as a convenient proxy for morality.

Consider that an army of tax-accountants labours every year to scour the farthest dingy recesses of the Finance Act to secure for their clients a little extra tax relief here, and an additional marginal easing there.

There's something of an analogy, too, with the way NHS dentists are paid. Under the "old" system, the archaic fee-structure required incredible attention to detail and pages of small print: and many a claim has gone to a Protection Society with the dentist's defence: "Well, the DPB approved it".

Under the new contract, the even more serpentine structure of the UDA target system has led to all manner of oblique activity. No fewer than one in five NHS patients returns for further treatment within three months, it is reported, and while complex treatments have fallen by half (according to some estimates), extractions have risen.

It would, once again, be easy to blame the contract – "the system"; but in the full glare of publicity, how would such arguments fare? Ask Julie Kirkbride, or Margaret Moran perhaps.

The words of Sir Kenneth Bloomfield – a previous reviewer of the NHS dental system in 1992 – might give Professor Jimmy Steele pause for thought. He wrote: "Over the years we have ended up with a system which is very efficient at paying dentists, but not so successful at improving oral health".

Now, it seems we have a system which has attracted unequalled opposition from dentists, and is still some way from providing full access, let alone improving health.

MPs' expenses, NHS dental Contracts – both systems are undeniably "broken" but let's not just use them as an excuse. A system is needed, but one that is fair, transparent and above all allows for the professionalism that we all still seek to aspire to, surely.

Notes to Editors:

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