

## The Future's Bright?

Steve Gates

Just as I was contemplating what to focus my column on this month, someone plopped the NHS dental statistics for England 2010/11 quarterly report on my desk...lucky me.

According to the report, everything appears to be 'on the up' with nearly 30 million patients being seen in the 24 month period to December 2010 - an increase of 773,000 on the March 2006 baseline. This is really positive news for all dentists with NHS commitments; and I'm not just saying that...around 75% of Denplan member dentists have NHS contracts within their practice after all!

I did find myself perplexed, however, when what should come plopping into my inbox next but research findings from the BDA. These announced that 59 per cent of dentists questioned had seen their patients cancel appointments, and 68 per cent reported decisions to defer treatment. Unsurprisingly, given these trends, more than a third of practitioners said they had seen an increased demand for emergency treatment during the past twelve months.

So...what are we to conclude from these two, seemingly opposing, reports? One standpoint could be that although the number of people seeing a dentist is increasing, the chances of those patients having follow-up treatment and regular, meaningful preventive care is reducing - and this is not positive news at all.

There's no denying that these are trying times and the figures above reflect the incredible job that both NHS and private dentists are doing around the country. So, while I am genuinely happy that the figures from the last 24 months are looking so promising, I fear that the future may not be so rosy - this increase in NHS attendance has, after all, been 'pump primed' by a phenomenal 23% increase in the NHS dental budget over the last three years. Will this rate of increase continue in the future - it's hard to see that, given the incredible financial pressures that the whole of the NHS is being placed under.

The challenge going forward, therefore, becomes how to make the two sets of statistics tally up in the future. One thing is for sure - the profession has seen its fair share of turmoil and undergone periods of considerable strain for more than 20 years now; and yet you continue to support and care for your patients with commitment and dedication.

However, although these may be trying times, they're also changing times. Minimal Intervention is set to make its mark on treatment figures and the new NHS contract is coming soon. Patient communication, practice marketing, training and professional support are also being made ever easier through a host of new advancements in email, internet, mobile phone and, more recently, social media. By embracing these technologies and utilising them effectively, both NHS and private practices can not only ensure that figures improve over the next 24 months, but you can eventually change public perception so that dental treatment is a willing choice, rather than a necessary evil.

494 words

**About the Author:**

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As Denplan's Managing Director since 2001, Steve is responsible for the overall strategic direction and growth of all its activities, in association with the Denplan Board and other Executive Leadership team members. He works particularly closely in areas of new product and business development, while maintaining hands on links with the dental profession.