

HERE WE GO AGAIN...

Roger Matthews

The announcement on 16 December, of the details for piloting a new (new!) NHS dental contract, didn't really answer most of the questions raised in September, when the Coalition Government announced that its splendid new proposal would be based on 'Registration, Capitation, and Quality'.

As an organisation which has promoted these three aspects of primary dental care for 25 years, it was hardly earth-shattering news. Perhaps – as I said to the Deputy Chief Dental Officer of England in November – they should take some notice of our experience in Denplan?

There is, of course, a huge difference between the Government's plans and Denplan's heritage in the private sector. The taxpayer foots about 75% of the NHS dentistry bill, with the remaining 25% paid by the individual patient. This means that the Government has not only a large say in How Things Work, but also that the austerity measures applied to the NHS as a whole will impact, very centrally, on the new contract.

Depending on which newspaper you read, or which politician you listen to, the extent of the 'cuts' or 'efficiency savings' applied to the NHS may vary. However, the general view is that the NHS requires a 3% injection of real-terms money each year just to stand still, and what is anticipated is in real terms a 4% cut each year until 2014. Indeed, the NHS Chief Executive, Sir David Nicholson has pointed out that PCTs are already "in meltdown", that staff are leaving and the bodies are simply not sustainable in their present form.

So while I'm delighted that there seems to be a recognition that capitation and a registered relationship with a dentist is conducive to a preventive approach for the long-term benefit of the patient, it's not too difficult for me to predict that once the Treasury has had its say, the outcome for NHS dentistry may be rather bleaker.

I don't want to disparage – and never have – the efforts of dedicated dentists within the NHS. About 75% of Denplan member dentists have within their practice an NHS commitment to some extent. But according to the BDA, some 40% of NHS dentists failed to achieve their UDA targets, and I rather suspect that most of these are precisely those who have been trying to do their best for patients under the existing contract, which even its architects now seem to admit has failed to fulfil the promises made prior to April 2006.

It has become rather tempting to join the conspiracy theorists who believe that the long term strategy – enacted through major change to the Dentists Act, the introduction of HTM 01-05 or its equivalent, and the imposition of regulation via the CQC (or the RQIA, or HIW or HIS, dependent on your UK country of practice) – has been to stifle dentistry in the way we have been accustomed to see it delivered. Certainly it's depressing to hear of dentists leaving practice, and thankfully this is not a conversation I've heard in Denplan meetings around the country.

I know that Christmas and New Year was a time for many dentists in England to complete their Care Quality Commission application forms, while those in Scotland and Northern Ireland anxiously await what 2011 will bring in the way of regulation for them. We've fielded many thousands of queries and anticipate continuing to do so throughout the coming year. We've developed further online Guidance for dentists who may be inspected by the non-dental staff of the CQC and remain closely in touch with their policy-making staff through the Dental Stakeholder group.

Naturally, this is not to say that we're in agreement with, or endorse, their approach, which remains just as alien to dentists and their patients' needs as when the Health and Social Care Act was first drafted (and dentists were not in scope). But as I've written before, we recognised in the summer of 2010 that a U-turn was very unlikely and that we were best placed to offer the practical advice, in plain English, that dentists and their practice teams wanted.

Set against the backdrop I've painted, we really do want to invigorate dentistry and help take it forward into our second quarter-century. As Woody Allen (I think!) once said, there are only two kinds of sharks, the ones swimming forwards and the dead ones.

Here we go again, yes, but how exciting our journey can be!

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731 words

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.