

Insult and Injury **Roger Matthews**

The decision by the General Dental Council on 24 February to delay a decision on the use of the title 'Dr' by dentists will be welcomed as at least a pause in what many in the profession see as an unrelenting war on their competence, dignity and trustworthiness.

Coming at a time when sterilised dental instruments are considered so risky and harmful that they must be re-processed far more often than those in hospital operating theatres; when dentists and their staff must submit to Criminal Records checks; when NHS pay is frozen and tariffs stand still while regulatory fees mount – well, every little helps.

Calling oneself 'Doctor' is for most not a matter of self-aggrandisement or even great angst – indeed there are not a few who wish fervently to use their surgical title of 'Mister' (which was in itself an honoured greeting in Yorkshire when I first practised).

And with the GDC receiving prompt reports of any crimes committed by registrants, CRB checks can hardly have revealed any stunning discoveries – no, it was the very challenge which most have found so unpalatable.

I've been asked many times why this administration, and the previous one, wanted to introduce heavy-handed regulation of an already regulated profession. One answer suggested to me has been the necessity of ensuring that private practices, many of which have been un-scrutinised, should be required to meet equivalent standards to those expected of their NHS counterparts.

On the publication of the Health Bill in January, however, I began to wonder whether the coalition government's determination to press ahead with CQC went rather deeper. On 17 January, Nick Timmins, a respected health commentator, wrote in the *Financial Times*:

“The NHS will, in effect, be turned from what is, broadly, a directly-managed healthcare system into something much more like a regulated industry of competing providers, over which the Secretary of State will no longer have day-to-day control.”

That gave me pause to think. I have predicted before that just as successive governments have removed other sectors from direct state control: telecommunications, utilities, transport – so each sector has spawned its own regulator: OFCOM, OFGEM, OFWAT and so on.

Now the government is bringing forward yet more reform in the shape of its Open Public Services White Paper, and the Prime Minister, writing in the *Telegraph* on 21 February said:

“Public services should be open to a range of providers competing to offer better services. Of course there are some sectors - like national security or the judiciary - where this wouldn’t make sense”

No mention of health being excluded from these plans, then.

Whatever you may think of this approach, there are potential benefits, provided as always that cost (or profit) is not put before quality. On the same day as Cameron’s piece, the *Independent* carried a piece by Ali Parsa, Chief Executive of Circle; the new private hospital group which has taken over, for the first time, the management of an NHS hospital.

One principle of his existing establishments is that, like John Lewis, hospital employees themselves have a direct stake in the business. He talks of the ‘absurdity’ of the public and private healthcare market in the 21 Century, of delegating responsibility to clinical teams and allowing them to manage both quality and cost for the mutual benefit of patients and the business.

We’re certainly on the brink of an entirely new era in healthcare in the UK, no less so than in the United States. Hopefully in the process, some of the inequalities in both systems can be managed out.

Right now, we're overwhelmed with regulation, litigation and challenges. When change comes it's often uncomfortable and even harsh. Dentists are right to feel that as (mostly) small business owners, whether under subcontract to the State or struggling with the economic realities of the post-recessionary age (or, most often, both), that the cards are well and truly stacked against them.

Shipping out – retirement, emigration – is one option, but shaping up is the other. I'm not aware of a third...resistance? If we want to take control of our own future it's probably futile to expect everyone to stand together (or someone else to do the standing on our behalf). That's never happened in the past and to be brutally frank I don't expect it to happen now. Change, as Gandhi observed, is first of all an internal and individual thing.

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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.