

MISSING, PRESUMED LOST
Roger Matthews

Maybe not quite on a par with Lord Lucan or the *Marie Celeste*, there is a mystery surrounding the apparent disappearance of a significant chunk of English dentistry.

Bear with me. At the end of the first year (March 2007) of what we should now call the 'old new contract' there were 28.1 million patients recorded as attending an NHS dentist (within the past 24 months)ⁱ.

At the same time, there were a shade under 74 million UDAs in circulation.

Fast forward now to the announcement, in May of this year, that some 89.1 million UDAs were commissioned by PCTs across the country at the end of Marchⁱⁱ.

That suggests that in the four years, from March 2007 to March 2011, the number of UDAs commissioned has risen by a shade over 20%, or if you really want split hairs and exclude the UDAs commissioned but not delivered, 19.4%.

What confuses me is that while, as widely announced, there have been seven consecutive quarters where the patient population attending in the previous two years has risen, this rise has been, over the same period, from 28.1 million to 29.1 million, this latter figure published again in Mayⁱⁱⁱ.

That's a patient numbers increase of just about 3.5%.

So where are all the extra UDAs going, I wonder? More treatment on the same patients? Surely not, since NICE (and the PCTs) discourage such too-frequent re-attendance patterns and have worked during the period to enforce this recommendation.

More UDAs for each patient? (i.e. more Band 3 treatments?). No, as the proportions of Bands 1, 2 and 3 have remained very closely the same, at around 54%, 30% and 4% respectively. Urgent treatments have crept up a tad, but not enough to explain.

More dentists? Clearly there has been an increase, but not enough to account for this difference and the total patient figures in any event would make that irrelevant.

I know it's statistical and therefore rather boring, but there must be an answer, since the excess proportion of UDAs at current market rates – even allowing for the modest increase in patient numbers, comes to over £300 million. I'm clearly missing something, but what?

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399 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.

ⁱ NHS Dental Statistics for England: 2006/7. ICNHS, August 2007

ⁱⁱ Dental Commissioning, SHAs in England at 31 March 2011. Department of Health, May 2011

ⁱⁱⁱ NHS Dental Statistics for England 2010-11 Third Quarterly Report. ICNHS May 2011