

NO JAM TODAY, NO JAM TOMORROW
Roger Matthews

The announcement of the Doctors and Dentists Review Body award on 10 March has given rise predictably to opinions on all sides. A zero net pay rise for dental practitioners will be interpreted by many dentists in practice as a pay cut.

As one Corporate Body advised the DDRB, dental consumables costs alone had risen by more than 21% in a year, an inevitable result of Sterling's fall in value and the fact that most dental materials are internationally sourced.

Moreover, wage inflation in the health sector has run at 3.2% and the introduction of GDC registration for Dental Care Professionals, and the significant costs of implementing HTM 01-05 have yet to be faced by many.

It reminded me yet again that in the summer of 2009, a report commissioned by the Department of Health (England) suggested that pay in the public sector would be more or less at a standstill for the years up to 2013.

Given that the national debt is currently over 13% of GDP (slightly worse than that of Greece) there can be little doubt that this news is only the first of a difficult period. Whichever Party gets to open the cupboards in the Treasury after the General Election, there must be more than a suspicion that dusty shelves will be the only things that meet their gaze.

A poll of spending intentions by Conservative parliamentary candidates (and there will be a lot of new faces this time around) revealed that while they did not consider Health to be a particularly cost-effective sector, it did not even feature in their priorities for 'efficiency savings' (cuts). However it must remain very uncertain how such pre-election bravado will translate into post-election action.

As most will know, the business of Government behind the scenes continues very much unchanged despite any shift in Party fortunes. The Civil Servants continue to beaver away at their projects and strategies. New ministers are advised, I would guess, that the past investment in Policy Thunderbolt (or whatever) means that it must proceed to delivery.

And so it would be unwise to assume that the proposals for Steele Implementation pilots which have surfaced recently will not continue whoever wins in May (or June). Here is a new timescale measured in years with a “transition” – yes, another one – to “new service arrangements” in 2013.

I can’t remember exactly when I first heard someone say that the only thing changing in the 21st Century was the pace of change itself, but if we now add a further three or four years on to the reforms of the past four years, it does appear that the foundations of dental practice, especially in the NHS, are not so much shaky as non-existent, when it comes to planning the future of individual practices.

How do you write a business plan when you know that “options for future service arrangements” are added to the parlous state of national finance? Especially when you know that “options” (as in *Options for Change*) can so swiftly become not plural, but singular?

I’m not pretending, either, that future life in the private sector will be exactly rosy, but at least it will be under the control of the business owner/s, rather than being directed from Stormont, Edinburgh, Cardiff or Westminster (each with its own dimension of local issues).

So the NHS jam looks thin or non-existent this year and indeed for the immediate future. But dentists will continue to provide the best care they possibly can for their patients, and will look for ever more innovative and effective ways to do so. Hopefully jargon-free as well (e.g. “patient empowerment programmes” and “clinical stakeholder engagement”). I will leave it to readers to envision what these might be.

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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.