

**YOU KEEP ME HANGIN' ON**  
**Roger Matthews**

The Supremes' hit of the 1960s was memorably re-recorded by a cheesy West Coast band called Vanilla Fudge – sadly I still have the vinyl - but the title, it seems to me, aptly reflects the way the profession is feeling in these post-Election weeks.

It seems clear that no immediate announcements are to be made about the future of the NHS dental contract – or even about the NHS itself.

The redoubtable Institute for Fiscal Studies has said the impact of the June budget will fall most heavily on the less privileged in society, but it has also noted that the swingeing 25% cuts in “unprotected” Government Departments, which are to be rolled out in the autumn, could fall to just 14% across the board if the Health Department and Overseas Aid were not ring-fenced.

We know that the NHS has to make £20 billion of “efficiency savings” in the next four years, and that public sector pay will be frozen for the next two years (what impact this will have on the deliberations of the Doctors and Dentists Review Body can be well imagined). But there are increasing calls for a review of the “frontline” services provided as well.

Cutting management costs in the NHS is easier said than done. 40% of NHS “managers” are clinically qualified staff. However the pressure is clearly on PCTs, whose responsibility for commissioning services is likely to be devolved now, either downwards to GPs, or upwards to Strategic Health Authorities. Where does that leave dentistry?

It has been said that it would take a brave politician to make major (restrictive) changes to the dental contract. And there are not that many brave politicians, they say.

Reading between the lines of the BDA's press release following their first meeting with Earl Howe, the new dentistry Minister, I detect an unwillingness from the Health Department to commit to any firm policies in detail. Steele pilots, Warburton Access initiatives, all seem to be on hold at present. Maybe even by the time you read this, their immediate future will have become clear, but I doubt much will appear before the autumn.

It's understandable and commendable that a new administration wishes to take stock, but what have they in mind?

Perhaps it would be more immediately welcomed if they would look more closely at the weight of regulation and legislation that the last Government foisted on the dental profession.

It has been well argued that the weight of HTM 01-05 has been disproportionately applied to primary dental care, issues around the variability of infection control in practice are accepted by reasoning practitioners, and borne out by research evidence. But the insistence on remote decontamination, away from clinical areas, while ideal, is impractical in many small practices, and the gaps in the evidence base for "best practice" have been well rehearsed.

The application of regulation by the Care Quality Commission to dentistry have been equally well reviewed, but arguments about the proportionality of their impact, given the comparative risks posed by dentistry (as opposed to those in, say, general in-patient surgery or A & E units) seem to have been largely ignored.

NHS contracted practices are subject to regular inspection and administrative scrutiny, it is true, but private practices are equally expected to conform to the requirements of the GDC, HSE, Environment Agency, Health Protection Agency and a myriad of other authorities. How much is "enough", and what is "good enough", one may well ask?

We have now in power a Coalition government whose objectives include the reduction of centralised *dictats*, a review of over-weaning health and safety regulation and above all the reduction of public expenditure. Was there ever a better time to look at how these inherited problems stifle and suppress the delivery of dental health care services?

It is unlikely, in the grander scheme of things, that dentistry will push its way to the forefront of policy-making. However, a Health Bill is proposed for later in 2010, and it is important for the wellbeing of a service accessed by over half a million patients every week, that some little time is taken to consider how dentistry might be productively taken forward.

Hanging on is something that the profession has become accustomed to. It took the last government eight years to advance a policy, and a contract in England and Wales, which most agree was ill-founded and which poorly served patients and professionals alike. We cannot wait anything like that long again.

[752 words]

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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.