

Small Cappuccino to Go

Roger Matthews

Once upon a time, not so many years ago, dental practices were virtually all housed in domestic premises. My first memory of going to the dentist was sitting in what must have been the dining room of a semi-detached house, with the chairs pushed back against the wall and the table filled with old “Giles” cartoon annuals and the like.

The surgery looked clean and shiny, but there were wooden cabinets for instruments and a gas flame flickered on the bracket table while net curtains concealed us from the road outside. Not unfamiliar memories to many of us Baby Boomers, I guess.

Yesterday on my way to a meeting, I called into Starbucks (other coffee brands are available) and recalled that, when I was young, it would have been a tea room or “caff”. The whole experience would have been entirely different – less corporate, possibly cosy in the suburbs or maybe, in a city centre, on the greasy side.

I don’t remember any details of the dental treatment I received in my youth (except that I needed rather a lot of it; unsurprising as both my parents had full dentures as far back as I can remember). What I recall of dentistry is what I suppose would now be called the “customer experience” and that was not, I have to say, particularly unpleasant.

In Starbucks, the customer experience is clearly intended to be at least as important as the liquids bought and consumed. Which is why the coffee now costs so much more. Does this work? To some extent yes, whichever branch you use, the taste and the surroundings will be remarkably similar, the furniture reassuringly familiar and the newspapers in the rack mostly the same.

The staff make all the difference – some are offhand, some grumpy, but on the whole they seem remarkably cheerful in my experience. There are one or two coffee shops that I go out of my way to visit precisely because of that factor (and some I rigidly avoid).

The greasy spoons are mostly disappearing, except in a few hallowed spots: markets, truck stops and the seaside all spring to mind. It's a little surprising, given Trading Standards and Food Hygiene regulations, that they survive at all, you might think.

Anyway, on to my meeting, this time with the supposed bogey-men of the profession, the Care Quality Commission. Things are starting to happen at last and we have further clarity on how the application process will run. As bogey men (and women) they are all individually charming, helpful and polite. They take on board all the practical difficulties that dental registration will imply.

Suggestions are accepted, clarifications given. They are just as bound by Regulations (which were not written by them) as we are, and I am more certain than ever that it's not the official intention to close practices or impose unrealistic burdens.

It will not be easy to bring all practices into registration, and there will be stumbling blocks I'm sure. It will be time-consuming for some, especially those who have cut themselves off (intentionally or not) from professional sources of good advice and guidance, which is available from many sources including our own.

But we will get there in the end and for 95% of practices April 1st will be a non-event. If we all know of someone in the 5% group, it's time we acted professionally too and let them know that this is not intended to be Armageddon for good dentists.

The "customer experience" is something that persists when the memory of the actual treatment has long since faded, and patients are entitled to a good one. In the end, that's what Regulation may, just may, help achieve.

[625 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.