

THE END IS NIGH (ISH) Roger Matthews

Have you ever wondered what happens to the doomsayers the day after they confidently predicted the end of the world? Must be miserable, mustn't it?

Not always, of course. One leading US preacher who predicted our downfall in April 2008 is still active on the lecture circuit (apparently he only said "the beginning of the end").

A less attractive fate befell the Russian who led his sect into a cave in 2007. The roof fell in and he was detained for psychiatric treatment.

Some said that the world as we knew it in dentistry would end in April 2009, but that didn't happen either. But 2011 isn't looking so good. Consider:

- 2011 is when the ring-fence comes off NHS dental funding
- 2011 is when NHS funding is to be cut by £8-10 billion (according to the NHS Confederation) over a three year period
- The GDC plans to start Revalidation in 2011
- The Care Quality Commission will regulate all practices in 2011
- And finally, the government has promised that anyone, anywhere (in England) will have an NHS dentist – by 2011

All told, these seem to be pretty good reasons for considering a retirement date in, say, December 2010. Or at least not booking in any patients too far in advance.

Of course, the ring-fence could be a moveable feast – it already moved once – but the predictions on Government spending cuts ("investments" according to the front bench spokesmen) do seem to be bedded in reality.

According to the NHS Confederation report¹ the next two years are set to be tough but manageable. We haven't yet seen the worst of Swine flu, and increases to 2011 are in the order of 4 – 4.5%.

But in 2011 and beyond, the challenge is “unprecedentedly difficult”. National debt interest and increased benefits costs from the recession will mean a real-terms reduction of more than 2% in year on year public spending.

So as the economy recovers, and prices for energy begin to rise, health spend will be deeply affected. The report calls for an abandonment of things that haven’t worked in the past, like increasing waiting lists, “slash and burn” cuts or ignoring quality and prevention. But proposals for “greater efficiency” do ring a little hollow.

On the same day that the Confederation released its report, the Office of National Statistics was reported as noting that, from 1998 to 2007, despite a 75% increase in public spending, NHS productivity had actually fallen by 4.3%ⁱⁱ.

So what is the NHSC recommending? You’ll love this:

- “having a clear and shared vision and values for the organisation and the local system”
- “having a well-developed methodology for making change happen”
- “ensuring that all parts of the system and different policy instruments are aligned”
- And “making sure that the behaviours of the different parts of the system are appropriate”

Whew! That’s OK then. For a moment, I didn’t think there was a definite plan in place. Now we can all relax again. For those of you still interested, the *real* end of the world, as predicted by the Mayan and Aztec cultures, is 21 December 2012. But I’ve still got a kind of soft spot for 2011.

Notes to Editors:

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ⁱ The greatest ever leadership challenge for the NHS? June 2009. www.nhsconfd.org/leadership

ⁱⁱ The Times, 12 June 2009