

THE JANUARY SALES Roger Matthews

Predictions are that with the continuing economic gloom on the High Street retailers will be continuing their January sales, possibly into the summer.

This seems to chime in with the initiative, which you may have read about, by North East Essex PCT to give away free dental check-up and treatment vouchers to those who have not attended an NHS dentist for more than two years. I hope the participating dentists have negotiated a suitably raised UDA value. And that their regular attendees, who have just paid for their NHS treatment, are not too miffed.

I recall an eminent health economist, whom we commissioned to look at NHS dental charge policy a few years ago, putting this sort of initiative as follows:

“Consider the current MOT system. Roads might be safer if the Government agreed to replace bald tyres free of charge, and urgently. But what effect would this have on tyre safety generally, and the sales of tyres...?”¹

Admittedly, patients attending for free dentistry might be encouraged to become regular (at NICE intervals, of course) consumers...but how many, I wonder?

Such promotions are of course offerings at the altar of the great god of Access, and a further Government pronouncement in January² re-emphasised the work that is now being done on that score.

Notably, a further Review of NHS dentistry (I've lost count of those). Access remains high on the agenda. Thorny issues also include whether to tinker with the current banding system, and how to allocate funding between PCTs.

¹ York Health Economics Consortium(2003): *Oral Health and Dental Care – a New Agenda*

² Further government Resposne to the Health Select Committee Report on Dental Services. Cmnd 7532, 20 January 2009, Department of Health

There is also an undertaking from all ten SHAs that everyone who needs access to NHS dentistry will have it by 2011. Didn't Tony Blair promise that in 1999? (within two years, so that's just 10 years added on) And aren't the promised reforms taking just a tad longer than originally expected?

Dentistry is also to gain from the advice of Dr Mike Warburton, whose most recent victory was to persuade the BMA that GPs should offer extended working hours. You may recall that the BMA was offered two choices: either do it at effectively no extra cost, or we will impose it and reduce your QOF payments. A choice, as one GP put it, between being shot once or twice³.

Do not dismiss this lightly. A Labour Party policy document last September explicitly mentioned that extended opening hours for NHS dentists was one option to improve access, as I think I have pointed out before.

Last October, the Department promised "high impact" measures to improve dental access (which, as a former Minister for dentistry pointed out in 2005 were never higher than 57% under the "old" system, and that was in 1995). If the above are indicative, then we have a way to go. But don't under-estimate. Longer hours, Quality Frameworks, Value for Money (the Government's, naturally) – there's lots more initiatives to come, I don't doubt.

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.

³ BMA News release: 13 July 2008