

**WATCHING AND WAITING...**  
**Roger Matthews**

We all know that by tacit agreement, none of the political parties majored much on the economy during the election campaign. And we all know that this was really the elephant in the room, an elephant subsequently hidden by the post-election horse-trading, volcanic ash, oil spillages and so on.

The £6.2 billion cuts announced to the press on 24 May were quite clearly signposted as only the preliminary round of immediate actions, and the economic route ahead was described as a “colossal task”.

Many commentators have noted that the only chance that this Government will have of ensuring its future electability, while still satisfying the international economic vampires waiting in the wings, is to get all the pain out of the way as soon as possible, in the hope that we will remember less of it when the next election comes around.

This chimed in quite well with the research cited by the keynote speaker, Dr Phil Hammond, at the recent BDA conference. He noted that past events were “framed” by the later stages of our experience. A painful childbirth, followed by the removal of the newborn, was much less positively recalled, compared to a similar experience where the baby was immediately embraced by the mother.

Dr Phil suggested that in dentistry this might equate to following any painful procedure by a positive and more pleasurable experience towards the end of the appointment. Should we, I mused, substitute something rather more refreshing than mouthwash? Maybe put some of our holiday snaps up a viewing on the computer monitor to round off the visit? I’m jesting, but you get the idea.

Back to the economy (sorry). We now know that the more severe messages are to be forthcoming in the 22 June budget and that this in turn will be followed by a Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) in the autumn. Only then will we know the full truth about what is in store for the health and welfare budget.

Some have pointed gloomily to what has happened in Ireland, where dental budgets have been slashed. Others look at Portugal, Spain and Italy where major cutbacks in public sector pay have been employed to tackle deficits smaller than that which the UK has to contend with.

Real increases in NHS budgets, promised by Andrew Lansley shortly after the election are not really sustainable in this climate, although there are always clever ways with statistics to prove (as indeed was done with dentistry back in the nineties) that funding is increasing, when the opposite is the true experience.

And one has to remember that salaries are the largest single component of health spending, with 3.5 million pay packets to accommodate. A public sector pay standstill seems the least that can be expected in these circumstances.

One early casualty has been the recommendation, by Professor Ian Gilmore, that prescription charges should be phased out for those with long-term conditions. Health Ministers have been quick to point out that such concessions must await the outcome of the CSR. Only a straw in the wind, maybe, but I would wrap up warm, because the breeze looks set to be chilly.

By coincidence I received today (the first official day of what is laughingly known as summer) a set of statistics from one of the largest dental specialist accountancy firms. They report that overall, NHS principal dentists have shown a significant increase in both turnover and profitability and that whilst Private dentists have experienced less volatility in recent years, their profits lag behind their NHS counterparts.

On the one hand this does suggest that dentists are better able to weather the storms than many who have been hit by the credit crunch and recession. On the other hand, does it also offer a tempting target to those who wish to trim any excesses from budgets going forward?

**643 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.