

## WHAT A DIFFERENCE A WORD MAKES Roger Matthews

It's funny, isn't it, how you can change the whole meaning of a document, a policy or even an industry/profession with just a small tweak.

Look for instance at *Options for Change*. By simply removing the plural 's' from Options, the DH managed to turn it into the Glorious Revolution of 2006 – one option, one contract, pretty much. Neat.

I'm hardly surprised, incidentally, that the Home Secretary has dismissed Professor Nutt, his senior drugs advisor, over the cannabis classification issue. '*Options*' was the first and last time in living memory that the Health Secretary sought the advice of an independent panel of dental professionals. And then took no notice anyway. Nothing new under the sun.

Back to my changing words theme. Under the 2006 Contract, a 'patient' was formally defined as "a person who is receiving services under the Contract", which was pretty clear. Under active treatment? - You're officially an NHS patient. In between check-ups?/Treatment finished? - You're no longer registered.

Indeed this point was hammered home in a number of advice sheets to PCTs in 2006. They were told (although some still don't believe it) that a list of a Contractor's clients (I'm avoiding the 'p' word here) did not actually belong to them. Long Live the Independent Contractor!

In the new, so-called Warburton, contract, that definition has changed. OK, it's two words but the effect is just as cathartic. A 'patient' is now defined as "a person who *has received* services under the contract". My italics. Get it? I'll spell it out in case it's the end of a busy day: every patient you have ever seen under the NHS is an NHS patient for the duration of your contract, that's to say, forever as far as you're concerned.

And that, of course, means that the People Controlling Things (PCT for short) actually own them – well have a right to their full data, which amounts to the same thing. It's a shame, after all the time expense and effort you've gone to, to sign them up, get them healthy, send them reminders, understand when they've forgotten their cheque books on the final appointment etc.

It's a general thing, too. In Scotland it's just been proudly announced that adult and child NHS dental registrations have risen again. Not really surprising when the current policy is not to allow any NHS patients to de-register this year. And from next year, that's forever.

Given the propensity for people to change their address, or their name on marriage, I confidently predict that Scotland will become the first country to have more than 100% of its population registered with a dentist. Not that that will necessarily make getting an appointment any easier (or dental health any better).

It used to be said that whereas a frog will jump out of a pan of hot water, the same frog will happily sit there while the temperature slowly rises, until cooked to a turn. I'm not sure I'd like to put that experiment in front of an Ethics Committee, so it remains apocryphal (and please don't send the Animal Lib people round). But you don't need Ethics approval for changing systems, only for treating patients.

Don't try to change the world, just change the word – it works just as well. And, it seems, we all go along with it.

**Notes to Editors:**

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