Government ‘spin’ continues

The Tories have accused the government of spin and distortion, after it claimed access to NHS dentists has improved throughout the country.

Official figures released at the end of last year show that 1.2m fewer patients saw an NHS dentist in the two years running up to June 2008 than in the last two years under the old contract.

However Anne Kreen, the health minister, told Parliament in December that ‘there is no question but that access has improved throughout the country’.

The minister has since admitted, in a parliamentary written answer, that she based that claim on figures from less than one third of primary care trusts.

A Department of Health spokesperson said: ‘In many areas of the country, increased investment, new NHS dental practices and more NHS dentists have already supported increased access. We want to ensure that this progress is reflected all over the country.’

Commissioning investigation launch

An independent commission has been set up to investigate the commissioning of oral healthcare in England and Wales.

The group, chaired by Professor Chris Drinkwater, president of the NHS Alliance, is expected to develop a framework for excellence in dental commissioning.

It will also consider the implications of the NHS Next Stage Review for dental services and explore how dentistry can be better integrated into primary and secondary care services.

Professor Drinkwater said: ‘The 2006 reforms of health service dentistry and the onus placed on primary care trusts to improve access to NHS care in the 2008/09 Operating Framework, alongside the challenges posed by the recommendations of the NHS Next Stage Review, mean that local commissioning is the big issue facing health service dentistry.’

He added: ‘An understanding of what constitutes excellence in commissioning, what practical options are available to commissioners and what can be delivered for patients are essential.’

The group is expected to focus on four major areas of work including innovative and flexible commissioning, integration of primary care services, developing oral health in strategic health authorities and primary care trust strategies and incorporating patient experience, including access, into commissioning.

The group includes representatives from the NHS Confederation, the Local Government Association and Picker Institute Europe, as well as senior figures from across the dental community such as Dr Susie Sanderson, chair of the British Dental Association’s (BDA) Executive Board and Marina Harris, president of the British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy.

The Independent Commission, which is expected to report its findings in September, has been established as part of a major BDA project exploring excellence in local commissioning.

Toothache

The BDA is calling on the government to invest in preventative work such as fluoride varnish and sealants to stop dental problems becoming more serious.

The BDA said: ‘Many of the problems that people present with at the dentist could have been prevented with a little bit of prevention. Too often people delay seeking help until the problem becomes too serious to resolve which is a great waste of time and money. This is particularly so for children and young people who are the future of our dental health.’