Whose practice is it anyway?

Quentin Skinner discusses the issue of control - control of your practice and the organisations with a potential interest in your business...

H ow funny life is, in that sometimes certain of its fundamental tenets change over a relatively short period of time without any one noticing. Consider how the mindset of the dental profession has changed over the last two decades....

Then....

Back in the early ‘90s, when BUPA DentalCover was launched in an effort to compete with Denplan Care, both brand-ed schemes felt the need to introduce ‘quality’ measures as part of the procedures necessary to help protect the national delivery of the brand promise. From a businesswoman’s point of view, this was a perfectly sensible proposition, as it would help to reduce the risk of many customers operating under the same banner getting tarred with the brush created by the actions (or inaction) of a smaller number of miscreant customers.

However, at the time, the profession took a very different view. I remember well from my time at Denplan, whenever we raised the subject of “quality” at seminars, the instinct of the profession was its fundamental tenets were being undermined by notions of control. It was also in the early 1990’s when we saw firstly third party control warnings, and then noticing. Consider how quality inspection by the plan administrator/insurer for the provision of employee benefits could indeed have been relevant to the operation of dentists’ own practice-branded plans.

I believe that the passage of time has shown that dentists who offer their own private dental plans, practice-branded and using administrative sub-contractors – a much cheaper and less stressful alternative than trying to do it themselves – have had no reason to claim any third party interference whatsoever. Furthermore, many of those who subscribe to a nationally-branded scheme have largely come to accept a degree of quality inspection by the plan administrator as a necessity, even if some might resent other moves to hijack patient loyalty away from the dentist to the consumer brand.

However, what makes me wonder about life is the degree to which dentists may be prepared to accept third party interference in their own private dental plans, where the administration was sub-contracted to back-office administrative agents.

Now....

4th, 5th, 6th party control... Oh, and interference and control by PCT staff is not all, not by a long way. In addition, the PDS Plus template contract allows for entry and inspection of the practice premises by: |

• NICE: an organisation apparently directed to help manage and control the costs of NHS care, and one that is not even represented by a dentist

• The Care Quality Commission: which, whilst retaining a prominent dentist as its advisor, represents yet another swathe of bureaucratic regulation, the need for which would be hugely questionable if the GDC was properly empowered to do what it was always previously responsible for doing in the past.

Local Involvement Network Representatives: doubtless, someone will come up with a more positive explanation of the need for LInNs, but to me this conjures up an unsightly visit by the People’s Party Representative in Stalin’s Russia, who certainly will not have the well-being of the dentist in mind...

Whose practice is it, anyway? So, there will always be those in life who will succumb to control by others, even when this points towards an ongoing squeeze on their personal circumstances. However, many others sooner or later find that such oppressive restrictions on the freedom to act as they have been brought up trained to do force them to look for a newer, independent way forward.

I would therefore encourage dentists who wish to operate in a working environment as free from third party control as possible to sit up and do some careful analysis of the alternative funding structures for the delivery of their dentistry, and choose the route that best ensures that they remain in control of their own practice. |