The new dental contract - full of holes and causing pain?

On March 6, the Patients Association launched a survey which asked Primary Care Trusts in England how they are responding to the new dental contract and the needs of their patients.

The Patients Association have acknowledged an educational grant from Denplan, which made work on the survey possible. As a result of the survey the Patients Association has called on the Government to:

• Examine the co-payments system for dentistry as the basis for expanding the availability of treatments elsewhere in the NHS.
• Ensure early diagnosis of serious oral illness e.g. cancer by giving patients the same level of preventive care as is now planned for other specialties in the NHS. Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) must offer a complete and safe NHS dental service to their population, which was intended to be a main benefit of the new contract.
• Remove the postcode lottery for patients which results from poor or weak commissioning by PCTs. Where PCTs offer an excellent, creative commissioning structure, they should take over the dental commissioning role of those that do not. Renewed guidance on best practice in commissioning should be issued.
• Require PCTs and dentists to ensure patients are fully aware of the important changes to their NHS dental care and charges, thereby minimising patient anxiety and financial waste.
• Ensure the same level of coverage and availability of specialist treatments, e.g. root canal, orthodontics, as applies to other specialists in the NHS.
• Require PCTs to ensure dentists comply with latest infection control guidance.

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The average Unit of Dental Activity (UDA) value is of £22.90. Asked if they anticipate harmonising UDA values across the PCT area in April 2009, 62.2 per cent of PCTs said they had no such intention.

About three quarters (76.5 per cent) of PCTs indicated that they permitted dentists to have child only contracts. Of those that did 55.5 per cent anticipated continuing permitting dentists to have NHS limited contracts after April 2008.

Only four per cent of PCTs had agreed any uplift of fees locally for endodontic treatments following the recent ‘single use in instruments’ advice.

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