Practices ride first pilot wave

Steele review pilots to commence in thirty UK practices in April 2010, will trial new ways to improve services for patients

The Department of Health is trialling a blended contract which will see dentists pay linked to the number of patients they see. It is one of the recommendations being piloted from the Steele report into NHS dentistry carried out last year.

The pilots, which are expected to take place over a two-year period, will be carried out at least 50 NHS dental practices. They will be trialling new ways to improve services for patients with improved access and new ways of measuring quality.

The NHS responded well to last month’s call for pilot sites by the Steele implementation board, and nearly 50 sites around the country will now pilot new ways of improving services for patients and the NHS from April.

One of the successful sites is City and Hackney, where the new blended contract is being trialled, which sees dentists being directly rewarded for the number of patients seen, the level of treatment each patient receives and the quality of that care.

Prof Jimmy Steele, who led the Independent Review of NHS Dental Services, made more than 50 recommendations to help improve oral health, increase access and ensure high quality dental care for patients in his final report published in June 2000.

Different methods of delivering these recommendations will be piloted thoroughly over the next two years to ensure they meet the needs of the NHS and patients, but the flexibility of the current dental contract means that if the local NHS wants to adopt changes sooner they are able to.

Health Minister Ann Keen said: “We know that access to NHS dentists is improving - more people visited a dentist in the last two years than at any period in the last decade. This is great news for patients who are now seeing the benefits of more than £2bn of investment in improving NHS dental services.

She added: “As well as continuing to build on this success and drive access even higher, we need to look at the quality as well as quantity of treatment being carried out by the NHS.

“Prof Steele made a number of recommendations for how we can do this and it’s fantastic that the local NHS is so keen to try out new ways of improving the dental care it delivers. I look forward to seeing the results of these pilots and extending them with wider piloting later this year.”

Chief Dental Officer Barry Cockcroft said: “Prevention and quality are two of the most important principles of today’s NHS and the sites piloting Professor Steele’s recommendations will be at the forefront of delivering high quality services built around patients’ needs.”

The Steele implementation board, which includes Prof Steele and Dr Cockcroft, are still inviting expressions of interest for sites to be part of the next wave of pilots which will start in September.

Informed by the pioneer wave of pilots, the next wave will trial a wider range of options to cover all the areas of the Steele review including; increasing access to NHS dentists, introducing patient registration, measuring quality as well as quantity of treatment; and encouraging dentists to carry out more preventative work.