NHS Dentistry in Crisis

After a year of the new contract, CHALLENGE has reported that NHS dentistry is perilously close to collapse, contrary to what Chief Dental Officer for England, Dr Barry Cockcroft would have people believe. CHALLENGE is a pressure group dedicated to returning NHS dentistry to some semblance of sanity and has carried out a survey of dentists to find out their views and to reveal the truth.

Almost all respondents did not agree with a series of statements made by the Chief Dental Officer for England, including:
- The new NHS contract frees up time for dentists to spend more time with their patients and reverts original payments.
- The dentists are paid the same amount under the new contract for 5 per cent less work.
- The average NHS dentist with a fairly high NHS commitment can earn £80,000 per annum for 5 per cent less work.
- The new NHS system takes dentists off the treadmill.

Patterns of treatment are changing for those who responded; most were providing fewer:
- Boot fillings
- Cohalt Chrome Dentures
- Multiple Crown Cases
- Bridge Cases.

CHALLENGE is a non-profit making organisation, membership is free to any dentist. Its website can be found at www.Chal lengeDentists.com. It will be holding a “Challenging the Summit” on June 7th in Birmingham, a major conference to investigate the legality of the new NHS contract and whether the contract could be open to challenge in court, and what further actions the profession may wish to take in position.

Which? claims NHS dentistry is a postcode lottery

A year on from the start of new NHS dentists’ contracts in England, research by Which? has revealed huge regional variations in the availability of NHS dental care, as well as a continuing lack of practitioners taking on new patients.

A total of 466 dentistry practices across all 30 strategic health authorities in England were contacted between 6th and 10th November 2006. Fieldworkers posing as potential dental patients planning to move to the area contacted the dentists asking for information about being taken on as a new NHS patient. No appointments were made.

The research shows that just over a third of dental practices (36 per cent) are taking on any new NHS patients; no significant improvement since 2005 when the figure was 51 per cent. In some parts of the country, the figure is even lower.

People living in the north west of England are less likely than average to have access to NHS dentistry – just 15 per cent of dental practices are taking on any new NHS patients. Residents of Yorkshire and Humberside (15 per cent) and south central England (16 per cent) are also worse off than most. The areas shown to have the highest proportion of dental practices taking on NHS patients were the west midlands (65 per cent) and London (59 per cent).

Which? campaigners have written to the Department of Health warning that services are in trouble or in terminal decline in their area, and that despite the new contract, many of my constituents still cannot get access to an NHS dentist. It is obvious that the situation is not improving, and we have received numerous letters from constituents who are shocked when their dentist stops accepting them as an NHS patient, and then find it impossible to find another dental surgery in the area, who will take them on. This situation is totally unacceptable and has been the case for far too long. It is time for the Government to do something about this and keep their promise of NHS dental provision for all, wherever they live.

In written questions Mr Watson the MP for Eastbourne asked how many dentists had exhausted their 2006-07 NHS budgets. In an interesting reply Rosie Winterton said that PCTs did not award dental providers an annual budget but an annual contract value – a sub-text distinction that may have escaped you. “Service levels may be defined by an annual number of units of dental activity or they may include service outputs that cannot be measured through courses of treatment if that makes sense to you. She went on PCTs, as the commissioning bodies, are responsible for monitoring the delivery of services by your local dental providers.

An Early Day Motion is an opportunity to test the water of opinion in the House of Commons by seeing how many MPs support it. Graham Stuart MP has put down the following about orthodontics:

“That this House notes with concern the geographical inequality in the provision of orthodontic care and the shortage of training places for orthodontic specialists; further notes that one fifth of orthodontic specialists are due to retire in the next six years; further notes that a shortage of specialists is driving practitioners who have insufficient training and experience; further notes that there are only two orthodontic special- ists serving the whole of Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire; and supports the British Orthodontic Society’s call for the Department to increase the number of funded training posts in U.K. dental schools.”

So far it has attracted 31 signatures.