On 15th March Health Ministers faced oral questions and those not answered in the House receive a written answer. One such was this:

11. Mark Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment she has made of the level of access to NHS dentistry.

And the answer:
Ms Rosie Winterton: Access to NHS dentistry is increasing—in April 2006, primary care trusts had commissioned 71 million annual units of dental activity; by January 2007 that had increased to 78.4 million.

Some oral questions are specific, but the first one tends to be general as Mark Hunter’s was. The Department then has to guess what is worrying the MP; because the second question will be the real one, what is bugging the MP. It may well be a constituency problem and then other MP’s, including the shadow secretary of state can join in with the others. The Minister can well be put on the spot.

Normally question number 11 would be reached but on that day, in answer to earlier questions backbench Labour MPs spun out the debate. Consequently Rosie Winterton’s awkward questioning was not reached, indeed she didn’t speak at all. There is a play showing in London’s West End called ‘Whipping it up’ which demonstrates what goes on in the Whips office where these tactics are planned.

To find out how the questioning might have progressed, go to Mark Hunter’s website where he posted this. Today (15th March 2007), Mark Hunter MP for Cheadle questioned the Secretary of State for Health about the lack of dental provision in Cheadle and across the country. In 1999 the Prime Minister pledged that by 2007, 90 per cent of the population would have access to NHS dentistry, according to the British Dental Association.

‘Commenting after Health questions, Mark Hunter said, “The level of NHS dentistry both in Cheadle and nationally is scandalous. It is appalling that after ten years of Labour government many of my constituents still cannot get access to an NHS dentist. It is obviously a situation that is not improving, as my postbag shows, I have received numerous letters from constituents who are shocked when their dentist stops taking them as an NHS patient, and then find it impossible to find another dentist 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 subject 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 their 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 sign up to it. Graham Stuart MP has put down the following about orthodontists:

“That this House notes with concern the geographical inequity 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 specialist orthodontists is driving patients to private practice; supports the British Orthodontic Society in their campaign to increase the number of funded training posts in UK dental schools.”

So far it has attracted 15 signatures.