Conservative dentistry

Is there a glitch in the matrix? Is history repeating itself? How much more turbulence can NHS dentistry take? Just a few questions Neel Kothari ponders in light of the recently revealed Tory party pledges

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In the run up to our next general election, all political parties are gearing up for the mother of all fights. Like always, NHS dentistry proves to be an interesting political football with media headlines announcing problems with dentistry resonating true within the fear-fuelled minds of the general public. Finding holes within any system is possible if you search long enough, but with the new dental contract you don’t have to look hard. The old system had many problems, but like a well-built German car, still managed to work after years of heavy mileage. While change and reform are an inevitable part of life, the question we have to ask ourselves is are we better off with the devil we know?

Back in 2006, the transition to the new dental contract probably couldn’t have gone any worse. Rather than a ripple in the pond we ended up with a turbulent rollercoaster and widespread criticism of the new dental contract. Opposition parties and patient organisations have publicly made their disdain for the new dental contract clear, but despite widespread condemnation little has changed since its introduction. With an upcoming general election, the polls tell us (at the time of writing) it is likely we may see a change in government and with this a change in direction for NHS dentistry. While I agree things need to change, I find my self thinking ‘here we go again’ and questioning what exactly do we have in store with another government?

Tough times ahead?

In my last interview with Mike Penning (Tory health minister) it was clear that he had a good understanding of the problem facing NHS dentistry. But what I really wanted to know was what changes a Tory government plans to make and the rationale behind why they have come to these conclusions? As I seem to remember, when the last set of changes were made there was a distinct lack of transparency between policy makers and dental professionals, as well as any form of trialling to test the effectiveness of changes prior to rolling them out nationwide. So when the Tory party recently unveiled a list of pledges for NHS dentistry this got me questioning, is there a glitch in the matrix? Is history repeating itself? And how much more turbulence can NHS dentistry take?

What they pledge

The Tory plans, which are outlined in a document entitled ‘Finding holes within any system is possible if you search long enough, but with the new dental contract you don’t have to look hard’ transforming NHS dentistry, include commitments to improve access to dental care, scrapping the unit of dental activity, introducing formal patient registration, reward preventative care given by dentists as well as enabling dentists to charge a fee for failed attendance and fixed quotas for newly qualified dentists. The document also sets the Conservative pledge to properly pilot any reforms. The white elephant in the room is that the document doesn’t mention exactly how dentists are going to be paid.

Whilst I agree many of the above points will help, as an NHS dentist I have to question the value of pledging to scrap a system before an alternative can be put forward. With an economy in recession and strict limits on public spending any government will find financing reforms difficult, so if there is to be another overhaul of the system, how much will it all cost? And how much of this burden will be passed on to NHS dentists?

The biggest surprise must surely be the introduction of a five-year fixed NHS quota to newly qualified dentists. With Mintel (a leading market research group) predicting downward growth of the cosmetics market until at least 2012, it is clear that the mass exodus of younger dentists to the private cosmetics industry may no longer be a problem for any successive government. But the problem is not that newly qualified NHS dentists choose not to work for the NHS, rather that they feel they cannot provide good quality work under the NHS, they cannot set up their own practices any more under the NHS (therefore having more control with their working practices) and they don’t see a viable secure future within the NHS. Also let us not forget NHS dentists now have little control over how much dentistry they can provide under the NHS, it is now up to PCTs.

Setting a standard

I applaud any government pledge to ‘properly pilot’ reforms and hope this sets the standard for the future. With the high media profile NHS dentistry has, let us hope any proposed changes have an overall positive impact on the system rather than just scoring political goals. Sure the taxpayer has funded vast sums of money to educate dentists, but would it not be a dangerous precedent asking newly qualified dentists to work a minimum of five years within the NHS; what if the local PCT does not have funding? Does this then mean any dentist wishing to have PCT funding will automatically receive it? How will this all be regulated? And what happens if PCTs run out of money?

While I am keen to learn more from any party floating ideas about proposed changes to the system, something still leads me back to my first question, are we better with the devil we know?

While the new dental contract may be construed upon pillars of sand, these pillars are still standing and I am interested to find out if the phrase “radical overhaul of the system” actually turns out to be a slight tinkering of the system based on what the government of the time can actually afford.

One thing that is absolutely clear – we are still a long way from any concrete plans, but let us hope policy makers learn from the mistakes of the past and this time round actually engage the profession when developing and implementing reform.