Performing dentistry

The year of 2006 not only ended a long cosy affair with the old NHS system, it also marked the death of the dental associate. In the wake of the chaos that ensued arose the dental performer. Neel Kohkari discusses the differences and whether the change has been for the better.

Unlike the dental associate, the dental performer now has to work within a very different set of rules that have never been trialled. Like all dentists working under UDA, the dental performer has to work within his financial plans for the future, as well as allowing flexibility in working patterns. This current system seems to offer front-line dentists less flexibility, with penalties incurred for not meeting Government set targets, regardless of the quality of the work provided.

Many readers will remember back in the early Nineties the phrase ‘second-gear valuation’ where the Government sent estate agents to assign council tax bands for properties and in many cases the estate agents assigned the valuation of a property with just a simple glance (while still in second gear). In dentistry, the current Government has used another crude assignment called the ‘test period’ where UDA valuations are based on work done within an arbitrary period of time.

While for many this transition may pass with little turbulence, for those qualified post-graduates who joined the leap from associate to principal, the dental performer has to work within his financial plans for the future, as well as allowing flexibility in working patterns. This current system seems to offer front-line dentists less flexibility, with penalties incurred for not meeting Government set targets, regardless of the quality of the work provided.

For performers joining growing practices, the chances are they are more likely to be seeing patients new to the practice who are likely to need far more work than regular attenders. Even with a quick glance it is clear to see that the foundations of the test period have been built on pillars of sand which may satisfy the masses temporarily, but in the long term may stifle the growth of younger practitioners who will inevitably follow working patterns set by practice owners and PCTs, rather than at a rate which works for them as individuals.

Lack of transparency

Since the dental reforms have taken place, there has been a shocking lack of transparency between principals and performers. With principals in most cases holding onto lucrative contracts, the UDA values passed on to performers have not always reflected the UDA values given by the PCTs. The importance here for performers lies in the fact that UDA values should be to a certain degree reflect the amount of work expected to be done per course of treatment; for example if a dentist was given a high UDA value perhaps that reflects the high needs of the local area compared with another dentist who has been given a low UDA value in a lower risk area. Since they would not need to do so much treatment per course. The test period not only does not apply to newly qualified dentists but is clearly not future proof. Many young practitioners looking to relocate now face a difficult time of predicting how reasonable their UDA target is, and rather than having the flexibility of being a professional now face the confines of being a performer.

In the past, this offered a valuable service to the Government, with dentists fronting the set up costs in full, unlike general medical practices where the Government typically paid up to 70 per cent of the set up costs. The DPA argued that the 2006 contract had resulted in a transfer of financial risk from the NHS to individual practitioners. Under the new arrangements, the traditional autonomy of dentists had been replaced by a system where PCTs ‘dictate to dentists where they will work, which patients they will see and to whom they must sell their practice in case of ill-health or retirement’. This all amounts to a high level of risk placed on individual practitioners, which for some has effectively murdered the leap from associate to principal.

Younger performers are struggling to ‘win’ auction-style contracts and set up NHS practices, the dental performer has to work within his financial plans for the future, as well as allowing flexibility in working patterns. This current system seems to offer front-line dentists less flexibility, with penalties incurred for not meeting Government set targets, regardless of the quality of the work provided.

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