Lord Howe has had a long involvement with health issues, having been opposition spokesman for health since 1997. Although never a specific responsibility of dentistry, there is no denying that there has been a part of the general issues surrounding healthcare. “I have always been well aware of the general issues that the area of dentistry involved; it was no accident that my party colleagues and I, in preparing our manifestos, made specific promises about dentistry. As the minister now charged with looking after dentistry, I am very pleased that I have this responsibility.

Key Representatives

“Although I have only been here for a few months I have made it my business to have meetings with key representatives from the profession to bring myself up to speed. I’ve met the BDA twice and I attended a reception in Westminster where I spoke with a number of stakeholders. I have met Prof [Jimmy] Steele informally, and I am due to meet him again within the next few weeks. In addition, I’ve received a number of invitations to visit dental providers and have already visited a clinic in Cambridge, which was extremely valuable to me.”

The political place dentistry seemed to hold in this year’s General Election shows exactly how much of a key issue for the voters it is. “I think dentistry is as much a priority for us as it is for the public. It’s become a priority for the public. It’s become a priority for the voters it is. “I think that the Steele review met with a good response. So, I am taking stock of all that before deciding in any detail how we are going to take the reform forward.”

Of course time is a major factor in the reforms and Howe is very conscious of the balance between getting things done and rushing the process. “One can never do things as quickly as one wants because there are so many things that are subject to consultation and detailed work - it can’t be done in a hurry. I can’t tell you that in a year’s time we will be on the brink of a new contract, that would be too soon, because any new contract will have to be piloted, we have to be sure it is going to do what we all want it to do, so we’re looking reasonably far down the track in terms of this Parliament. By the middle of this Parliament I would hope to be very much further with the new contract.”

Centralised control

The biggest topic that has been discussed over recent times is the White Paper and the implications that it will have for dentistry. Speaking of the proposed return to more centralised control over dental commissioning Lord Howe said: “The point of that proposal is that we should first of all have a commissioning mechanism designed to ensure consistency, as I mentioned, and in the standard of consistency. One of the commissioning board’s tasks will be to promote equal access and its access to a service that delivers quality that I think lies at the heart of this.

“Also I think that we felt that it wasn’t appropriate to give GP consortia the commissioning responsibility for dentistry. I think that it sits more logically with the board as it does with services like Pharmacy and we’re looking at other areas which may more logically sit with the NHS commissioning board, nothing to do with dentistry. How the board configures itself is a matter for them. But I would be surprised if it didn’t consider regional outposts so that services such as dentistry are commissioned with a view to the needs to a local population.”

One of the major fears expressed over the new proposals is what is going to happen in the period between PCT control and the taking over of the reins by the NHS Commissioning Board. Many practitioners are concerned about how they’re going to be able to interact with their PCTs in the interim period, and Lord Howe was quick to reassure: “This is a very important question and it’s one that we’re looking at across the piece. I would like to reassure practitioners that we are alive to the risks in all of this but we believe it to be manageable and we have time in which to make sure that nothing slips between the cracks, not least dentistry.

“PCPs are clear as are strategic health authorities that they have a very important role to play in making sure that this transition works smoothly, we will be setting up the NHS Commissioning Board in shadow form quite soon, so that by the time it starts its role for real we should have sorted out most of the transfer functions. Of course we don’t plan to abolish PCPs until we are absolutely sure that the transition has occurred. I can understand the anxiety of dentists but I think they need to be assured that I am very much with them on this. I am not going to take risks with the way that NHS dentistry is made available to patients and there certainly will be no hiatus in terms of administration.”

Dental Tribune recently met with Lord Howe, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Department of Health) with responsibility for dentistry, and asked him about his feelings about the current dental system and where he feels improvements could be made.

Lord Howe: I think dentistry is as much a priority for us as it is for the public.
slightly from the pre-existing guidance that were set out in the BDA infection control document (A12), so I think its wholly appropriate that dentists meet those requirements to reduce the risk of transferring infections and the evidence that the requirements have the effect of doing that is also pretty clear.

“The other side of the guidance of course is best practice, which is quite separate. We have been quite deliberate in not setting a timetable for dentists to meet best practice as we know that for many practices this is difficult and for some it isn’t. What we’ve said is that we expect dentists to have a plan to work towards best practice; there is no mandatory timetable involved. The HTM 01-05 guidance is an evidence based document and for that reason I’m not minded to revisit it, other than to obviously update it as time goes on and our knowledge improves.”

Lord Howe definitely seems to be taking dentistry to his heart, especially focusing on the longer-term aspects of improving oral health in children. “What I want to see is us doing a lot better with children’s dental health. We need to find a way through the public health agenda, accessing young mums in particular and getting the right messages across to them. There’s some quite promising work going on in Scotland in this area and we can perhaps learn from that. I just think that improving children’s oral health and getting the young into good habits early on is massively important. When you look at children with poor oral health, you can see it impacts on them adversely throughout their lives. It’s the most damaging way to start your life. So I’m keen to look at ways in which we can help children avoid tooth decay and get them into good habits. It is a long-term challenge, it’s not going to happen in a hurry but I wanted to mention that because it very much permeates the thinking we’re doing on the dental contract and public health planning.”

“I have looked at this in some detail with CDO Barry Cockcroft’s help and I’m absolutely clear that no self-respecting dentist would wish to do anything other than to meet essential quality requirements.”

Lord Howe was born in 1951. He was educated at Rugby School and Christ Church, Oxford, where he read Mods and Greats. After leaving University in 1973, he joined Barclays Bank and served in a number of managerial and senior managerial posts both overseas and in London. In 1987 he was appointed London director of Adam & Co. plc, the Scottish-based private bank, where he remained until 1990.

In 1991, Lord Howe became a government whip in the House of Lords with responsibilities, successively, for transport, employment, defence and environment. Following the General Election of 1992 he was appointed Parliamentary Secretary (Lords) at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; and in 1993 Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defence, a post he relinquished at the 1997 General Election.

He has been opposition spokesman for Health and Social Services in the House of Lords since 1997. He is an elected hereditary peer under the provisions of the House of Lords Act 1999.

In May 2010, Earl Howe was appointed Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Health.