The government rebuffs HSC report

Dental practitioners have condemned the government’s response to the Health Select Committee report on NHS dental reforms for being ‘in total denial’ and ‘failing to accept any criticism’.

Derek Watson, chief executive of the Dental Practitioners’ Association called the response from the Department of Health ‘fairly predictable’ and said: ‘The Health Select Committee has done all of this work and it seems to have been ignored’.

In its interim response to the report on dental services in July by the Health Select Committee, the government said that the new dental contractual arrangements provide a better basis for Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) to commission services, as the new system equips them with greater powers and flexibility to meet the needs of local people’.

It did accept the Committee’s view that progress on improving access has been disappointing to date and pledged to ‘work with professional and patient groups to review how, both nationally and locally, we and the NHS can achieve the maximum benefits for patients from these reforms’.

Mr Watson said: ‘We were somewhat surprised that given that the Committee came up with a number of valid comments and concerns, the government is sticking very much to their line of nothing is wrong.’

One of the findings of the Health Select Committee was that things have worsened since the changes to the General Dental Service in April 2006 with nearly a million fewer people seeing a dentist since the reforms.

The government concurred with the Committee in its response that ‘progress during the first two years of the new arrangements was uneven’.

However it added: ‘The evidence shows that the NHS is now commissioning a growing volume of dental services, which we are confident will feed through into higher levels of access.

There were 2.7 per cent more courses of treatment in 2007/08 than in 2006/07 and the number of dentists doing NHS work increased by 65%.’

The government admitted that the change from the old dental contract to the new one had been ‘a difficult transitional period, both for PCTs and for dentists’.

It claimed that an increase of funding by 11 per cent in 2008/09 will enable PCTs to commission a far greater range of new services and will further improve access.

Back in July, the Health Select Committee found that ‘the introduction of units of dental activity (UDAs) as the measure of dental activity and the basis for remunerating dentists has proved extremely unpopular with dentists’.

However the government claimed in its response that the ‘available evidence supports the view that this has led, as intended, to a reduction in workload’.

It added: ‘For instance, statistics published by the NHS Information Centre on 21 August 2008 suggest that dentists’ working hours are shorter than they were in 2000’. In response to the report by the government, Susie Sanderson, executive board chair of the British Dental Association said: ‘This response acknowledges the many issues facing NHS dentistry in England and Wales.’

The BDA recently called for the ‘reintroduction of effective and constructive consultation with the profession which was so lacking in the development and implementation of the new contract’.

Ms Sanderson added: ‘We hope that the positive response to the BDA’s call for dialogue with the profession and patient groups signals the start of a more constructive period in the relationship between the government and the profession.’

John Benshaw, co-founder of Challenge, a campaign group of general dental practitioners, said: ‘The Department of Health is in total denial of the problems because, in their terms, their planned changes have been totally successful. Their response to the Health Select Committee says as much in so many words.’

He added: ‘The Health Select Committee looked at the problems in the service from a patient’s point of view – as indeed they should. They also looked at the problems from the point of view of the providers of the service – again, not unreasonable. Their conclusions were clear and accurate. The system is not working.’