Grinding teeth

The credit crunch is causing people in the UK to grind their teeth more. Dentists are finding that the number of patients who grind their teeth has increased in the past two months – at the same time as recent hikes in petrol, energy bills, food and mortgage costs.

Keith Cohen, a dentist practising in Harley Street and the City, noticed the change two months ago and is blaming it on stress, one of the factors most commonly linked with people grinding their teeth.

Alexander Jones, a Yorkshire dentist, has also seen an increase in people with pain around the jaw and snapping the corners off teeth, probably around 10-15 per cent since the summer – both symptoms are an indication of grinding teeth.

Grinding teeth can lead to gum and nerve damage and can also cause jaw and muscle problems.

Top school

The University of Manchester’s School of Dentistry has been ranked top of all dental schools in the UK for student satisfaction.

It is a double triumph for the school, which made history in the summer – both of its graduates were ranked top of all dental schools in the UK for student satisfaction.

Current guidelines by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) say healthy patients do not need more check-ups more than once every two years.

However chief dental officer Dr Barry Cockcroft claims some dentists are asking patients to return every six months.

He has also accused them of maximising their profits by splitting treatments which could be done in a single session, leading to more check-ups.

Dr Cockcroft said he is talking to primary care trusts (PCTs) to work out how to stop dentists spreading treatments across different appointments so they can make more money.

Responding to the accusations, Susie Sanderson, chair of the British Dental Association’s (BDA) executive board said: ‘The British Dental Association does not have the necessary data to comment on these suggestions. If the Department of Health does, it should share that information so that it can be investigated and better understood.’

The interval between recall is, according to NICE guidelines published in 2004 and supported by the BDA, a matter for a practitioner’s clinical judgement in consultation with the patient. For adult patients, that interval is required to be between three and 24 months.

She added: ‘The significant problems with the new dental contract have been recognised this year by the House of Commons’ Health Select Committee.

Dentists across the country are working hard to deliver the best possible care for their patients despite those problems. What those dentists need is the support and constructive dialogue the profession has been calling for, not allegations of wrongdoing from the architects of the reforms.’

Dr Cockcroft claims that dentists’ pay has shot up since the implementation of the new contract.

The average dentist’s salary in 2006-07 was £86,153. This compares to £67,000 under the old contract leading Dr Cockcroft to infer that dentists are better off financially under the new contract.

The BDA however claims that these figures supplied by NHS Information Centre fail to paint the whole picture.

Peter Ward, chief executive of the BDA, said: ‘These figures do not tell the full story. They fail to take into account the clawing back of money from NHS dentists who have failed to meet the flawed treatment targets set for them. We know that almost half of the high street dentists across England and Wales could be subject to such clawback this year, and are currently facing an anxious wait to see whether and how they will be penalised.’

John Benshaw, former chair of the BDA, who refused to sign the new contract and left the NHS to go private after 37 years, said: ‘There can be no doubt that many practice owners have done well out of the new contract. They have reduced their own NHS commitment and found associates/performers to do the work for them at a fraction of the price.

He added: ‘Only an idiot would suggest that patients are being dragged into unnecessary treatment. It is grossly insulting to both patient and dentist to suggest that the first is so stupid as to not realise they are being conned and it’s insulting to suggest that dentists need to or would provide unnecessary treatment, especially NHS check-ups that don’t bring in that much money anyway.’

Eddie Crouch, a Birmingham orthodontist agreed that ‘some dentists are finding the new contract more and more advantageous.’

However he said: ‘The figures on earnings are not accurate as they are based on a year when payments to dentists were unusual due to the overlap of old and new contracts.

‘I do not think that unnecessary referrals are contributing to the increased earnings of dentists, but certainly attaining UDA’s by splitting treatments has been a way that dentists have hit targets and not necessarily increased costs. It would be interesting to see how many of the dentists who favour the new contract would still feel like this, if such practice was stamped on by the PCTs and DH,” he added.

Cumbria fluoridation

NHS North-West is looking at extending water fluoridation into more areas in line with the government’s fluoridation plans.