A system under duress?

In the first of a new series, Neel Kothari looks at how the recent changes in NHS dentistry have affected the way the service now operates, and asks whether reforms have actually helped solve the problems they set out to achieve.

Since April 2006, the new dental contract has been widely criticised by the press and dentists alike, and despite protests from the profession, new contractual reforms were implemented nonetheless. As a result, we now live in a new age, where people's dental problems fall neatly into one of three categories for which we have a certain remuneration, depending on the care we've provided.

We no longer provide items of treatment; instead we are providing courses of treatment. If these courses happen to be short, such as a simple filling or a single crown, life tends to be stress-free, but what happens when we have to do more? And why do some dentists complain more than others?

Common complaints

The variety of treatment available in general dentistry practice today can be staggering. Sure, some procedures can be challenging, but there are now more reliable ways to save or replace teeth than in the past, and dental materials have also come a long way, and are far more reliable and predictable. So why, according to the parliamentary Health Select Committee (HSC), are dental technicians now complaining that they have less work and why are dentists pulling out more teeth and saving fewer?

Over the past few decades, since the start of the NHS in 1948, the oral health of the nation has improved significantly, and for a while time stood still. The NHS continued to tick along with dentists generally choosing to work in more affluent areas, leaving many areas of the country with a poor supply of NHS dentists. In addition, there was a growing concern that the NHS offered too many incentives to provide complex courses of treatment, rather than preventative care.

Poorer areas suffering

Since the care principal of the NHS, to be available to all, was being seriously eroded, many were asking why poorer areas were suffering, while wealthier areas were able to enjoy the benefits of the NHS. In April 2006, the Department of Health (DH) made vast reforms to the NHS, giving more power to the PCTs and simplifying a complex charging system into three broad categories. While dentists protested against these changes, we nevertheless succumbed to the will of the Government and accepted them as a way of providing health care.

A recent HSC report criticised much of the new contract. Its conclusions have not come as a surprise to most of those working within it. Although this contract was introduced without piloting, we now know that any further changes must now be rigorous. Testing; so, like it or not, this contract is here to stay at least for the time being.

Targets too rigid

The HSC has recognised that the contract's new remuneration system based on units of dental activity (UDAs) has proved extremely unpopular with dentists and many PCTs have set unrealistic UDAs targets and have applied these targets too rigidly. The new challenges of working in the NHS now involve managing these targets, or else facing financial penalties. Those dentists who manage to finish their targets early may not automatically receive further funding and as a result, may be forced to either work privately or not at all. The fundamental problem here is the lack of clarity and uncertainty in terms of what the future holds. While PCTs expect UDAs to be appropriately rationed throughout the year, in practice, for many dentists this is not always possible. Those dentists who are struggling to meet their UDA requirements face having to repay the PCT for uncompleted UDAs, regardless of the amount of work they have provided per course of treatment.

While the remuneration system is based on historical data, many younger practitioners either do not have a reference period or may have changed the way they have practised since then. Those seeing new patients, often have to provide more restorative care per course of treatment, compared with practitioners seeing patients on a continuous basis. This leaves many younger dentists having to cope with unrealistic and unrepresentative targets in an unsettled system.

A bleak future?

Although one of the primary aims of the new dental contract was to improve access, the HSC reports that fewer patients are visiting an NHS dentist than before April 2006 and access to dental care in many areas so far shows no sign of improvement. As a profession, we now face the difficult task of learning to cope with a challenging system without knowing what the future really holds in store. Dentists have argued that these difficulties make working in the NHS unfavourable, but little has been done to ease dentists' working lives, with many in the profession now questioning whether it is feasible to carry on in the NHS.

Moving forward

So what can be done to rebuild the burnt bridges of trust between dentists and the PCTs? Well, to start with we must know the direction we as a profession are heading in before we get there. We still have no clear idea what to expect after April 2009, which makes financial planning (such as investing in further staff or investing in equipment) a logistical nightmare.

In my opinion we must return to a system where dentists are appropriately rewarded per item of treatment rather then per course, and above all, return fairness to both the dentist and patient alike. But will this really happen or is this an unrealistic dream? If the contract does change, are we as a profession ready for this change, and can we be certain that it will be for the better?

Over the course of the next few articles, I will be looking more closely at the day-to-day impact of the new dental contract and the effects this is having on dentists and patients alike.

Contact Info

Neel Kothari qualified as a dentist from Bristol University Dental School in 2005, and currently works in Cambridge as an associate, within the NHS. He has completed a year-long postgraduate certificate in implantology at UCL's Eastman Dental Institute, and regularly attends postgraduate courses to keep up-to-date with current best practice. Immediately post graduation, he was able to work in the older NHS system and see the changes brought about through the introduction of the new NHS system. Like many other dentists, he has concerns for what the future holds within the NHS and as an NHS dentist, appreciates some of the difficulties in providing dental care but acknowledges that any changes to the NHS dental system are necessary to ensure dentists' working conditions are sustainable.