It’s a sad state of affairs that the British public is resigned to booking dentistry appointments away from an otherwise civilised country. Flying abroad to get the basics done is a sham – period, but then being urged to investigate the dentist they are seeing as well makes a mockery of the UK dentistry system. So now patients are combining their holidays around implants and fillings. Some people might think that if they can fork out for a holiday as well as their dental treatment - albeit abroad - then they must be able to afford it. But if the treatment they need is going to take a week or two then they have to find somewhere to stay. Plus who wants to stay away from their family for that long anyway?

So shows like the Health Tourism Show 2008 has its place, and if Portuguese clinics can offer cheaper implants with a comfortable hotel to boot who wouldn’t be tempted? Nevertheless let’s not be too damning. With the government carrying out a consultation on an EU directive that will allow patients to ask the NHS to pay for their dental treatment abroad, things could be looking up. It is asking for the views of healthcare professionals, patient groups, health organisations and the public on the new Patient Mobility EU Directive. As public health minister Dawn Primarolo said last week: ‘We want to ensure that, where UK patients choose to travel abroad for care, the NHS retains the ability to decide what care it will fund.’ And this is great is it not? Perhaps. But how will they work out what UDA band fits what treatment if the treatment they have done is above and beyond any of the UK bands? Moreover, why waste time faffing around on a new consultation anyway when really their efforts could be used elsewhere, i.e. finding new ways to attract the UK’s profession back into NHS dentistry, and increasing more dental students a year.

Handing out incentives to new graduates is one way of encouraging some dentists to stay put and work in the NHS. It’s already happening in the north east of Scotland at the Aberdeen Dental School. But are the incentives big enough to keep the graduates away from the much greener grass?

Opening new training schools is of course another step in the right direction – our CDO opened another one in East Lancashire, and is one of the first dental schools to be opened in 100 years. David Peat, chief executive of East Lancashire PCT, is understandably thrilled with the new school. As he says: ‘We see this as a major opportunity to train our own NHS dentists of the future, while helping local people as the trainee dentists do their supervised practical.’ Whatever happens with dental tourism and the UK’s profession, it’s always worth remembering our glass is never half empty – but always half full. 

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