Editorial comment
A double-edged sword?

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) global database, adults with no teeth have fallen by 50 per cent from 1968 to 1998. Always the optimistic, this is great news. Or is it? Like the elixir of youth, keeping our teeth until the grave should be the ultimate goal, and let’s face it we are getting there – on both counts. Only there appears to be a problem. Whilst we are delighted to have better teeth for longer, we could really do with a bit of help along the way. So hello access problems - again. Now speaking to Dr Cockcroft the other day, we asked him about that niggling, irritating access rumour that everyone’s talking about, and this is what he said. ‘Access is completely unrelated to dental disease; it’s education, smoking, cessation, obesity and diet that affect it – it’s also the availability of fluoride toothpaste and water fluoridation coupled with sugar consumption.’ And yes of course lack of access doesn’t cause dental disease, but without checkups any minor problems will quickly develop into much bigger snowballs. Does a categorical denial come to the fore? Or are the UK’s pensioners sitting around smoking, eating too many sweets and piling on the pounds again? Tut, tut, tut, but I don’t think so. The charity, Help the Aged has no reason to tell lies. It says that ‘elderly people are finding it hard to see a dentist because of poor access to dental services.’ Enough said? No, because it’s not just difficult it’s an acute problem for the housebound as well as people in care homes. In her own words, the senior health policy officer for the charity, Charlotte Potter said: ‘Services are just not flexible enough and it means that elderly people often go without treatment.’ And ironically, this problem is exacerbated as increasingly more elderly people keep their teeth for longer. Now I repeat, it is fantastic that we have our own teeth as we draw out our dwindling pensions – it really is, but is this turning into a double-edged sword? If old people can’t get check-ups the knock on effects could turn into pain, discomfort and extra hassle they are too tired or frail to deal with. The charity said that more than a third of over 75s fail to have regular check-ups, and this is the highest for any age group. By limiting access and having inflexible NHS dental care nobody wins, and pensioners continue to suffer in silence. Thank god for charities in this instance.

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*53.3% of PCTs anticipated withdrawing provisional dental contracts in April (published data from April 2009). Source: The Patients’ Association, 'The New Dental Contract – A Survey of Primary Care Trusts in England', 06/03/09.