The TV ‘Truth’ about dental professionals?

Screening of Dispatches documentary prompts rallying call from dental organisations

Channel 4’s programme ‘The Truth about your Dentist’, the newest addition to the Dispatches series, has claimed dentists are misleading patients about their rights to NHS treatment.

According to Channel 4, the programme exposes dentists who are waiting until patients are in the chair before telling them they must pay hundreds of pounds for private treatment, which should be available on the NHS. Dispatches also reveals that children’s teeth are being neglected under the NHS and that cost-cutting dentists are outsourcing lab work to countries such as China where there are little or no checks on safety or quality.

The programme, aired on 23rd May, plans to expose dentists who have been overcharging and misleading patients who have sought treatment from the NHS.

Commenting on the documentary, Kevin Lewis, Director of Dental Protection, said: “The word on the street is that this exposé features yet another investigative journalist doing the rounds of different dental practitioners and comparing what is recommended or more pertinently in this instance, offered.

“The traditional version of these media ‘Rentagob’ outings would reveal that ten dentists can come up with 11 treatment plans. The former was evidence of one form of synapse-based dentistry (natural variations in clinical opinion), while the latter is evidence of an entirely different version of the genre. History tells us that you get more variation in clinical decision making if any kind of reward gets mixed up in the thinking process. This may take the form of real money, or virtual money (such as UDAs), or performance ‘targets’ of the kind that robbed hospital managers of any semblance of rational behaviour as they desperately tried to manipulate their results in relation to waiting list targets.

“The timing of the Dispatches programme, due to be screened just a few weeks after the extraordinarily confused, one-sided and emotive anti-dentist piece by John Naish in the Daily Mail (April 22nd) suggests that there may have been an extensive briefing of the media by Department sources, over and above the ‘Dear Colleague’ letter from the CDO, linking the results of the Adult Dental Health Survey to the 2004 NICE guidelines on dental recall intervals. Perhaps this was timed to coincide with (and add weight to) the Government comment in mid-April advising patients to disregard any advice from dentists to attend for sixmonthly checkups. It does all have the fragrance of a bit of orchestration.”

Dr Susie Sanderson, Chair of the BDA’s Executive Board, said: “Dentists are highly-trained, caring professionals whose first priority is their patients. Each practitioner is expected to do what they feel is best for the individual they are caring for and, accordingly, treatment plans will be developed in consultation with that patient. Effective communication between patient and practitioner is essential and the BDA strongly encourages this process so that a mutual understanding of what treatment involves and what it will cost is achieved.

“In the rare instances where misunderstanding or problems do occur there are formal procedures for resolving them, via either primary care trusts, the Dental Complaints Service or the General Dental Council.”