Did Channel 4 Dispatch the truth?

Dental Tribune looks at the latest programme to highlight NHS dentistry

So, The Truth About Your Dentist has been aired and has been the topic of many a conversation between colleagues in the dental practice.

The Channel 4 Dispatches programme was broadcast last month and attracted a combined viewing of approximately 1.1 million people between the original broadcast and +1. Despite the original misgivings of many within the profession, the programme was not the dentist-bashing one-sided affair that was expected – in fact, many dental professionals have said that it has helped to draw attention to some of the flaws of the Unit of Dental Activity (UDA) remuneration system.

Dental Tribune has spoken to some of the dentists who appeared on the programme, as well as receiving comment from dental professionals.

No sensationalist negativity

Dr Gareth McAleer, dental practitioner and contributor to the Dispatches programme, commented: “There were several dentists involved in the making of the programme. We wanted to make sure there was none of the sensationalist negativity often seen with other programmes; this is often because the profession doesn’t get involved in the making of programmes such as these and so there is often only one side presented.

“In my opinion there seems to have been a lot of research done in the beginning: first the filmmakers called a number of practices, and then chose practices to send mystery shoppers to. As the research progressed, it was obvious to the filmmakers that they were indeed on to something.”

Dr McAleer was full of praise for his dental colleagues who agreed to be part of the programme and give the profession a voice: “It was great that the dentists who came onto the programme didn’t hold back explaining the problems of the system – this gave the programme balance. There was a lot of negativity from certain members of the professions who were chosen because they came across with a depth of honesty and integrity, showing that not all dental professionals were like those who had been filmed in their practices. This was to let the public see that although there are some dentists who are not wholly ethical, there are plenty out there who are.”

Dr McAleer also gave his opinion about the current state of NHS dentistry: “I believe the government needs to listen to what dentists are telling them; we told them in 2000 that the system would fail, and if they don’t listen to dentists now, that there needs to be a completely new system implemented for NHS dentistry to work, then it is a criminal waste of time and money piloting a system we already know will fail.

“The issues surrounding dentistry today are much too big to be covered in one programme – even the filmmakers acknowledged that – so don’t be surprised if there is a part II to this story!”

Also featured in The Truth About Your Dentist was Dr Tony Kilcoyne, Specialist in Prosthodontics based in Haworth, West Yorkshire and an elected dental member of the GDC Council. Speaking to Dental Tribune, Dr Kilcoyne said that all comments given at interview were his own personal opinion and done in isolation to other parts of the programme, so until it was broadcast he wasn’t sure if, or what, would be included in the final programme.

“Whilst the adverts for it focussed on the title, The Truth about your Dentist several days beforehand, the expectation was that this would highlight dentists as being the worst culprit for the continuous problems that beset NHS dentistry in England. However whilst the programme raised concerns whether some dentists offered everything the NHS contract requires, an equally strong theme was the failings of the existing UDA system itself, which simply isn’t designed to deliver complex or time-consuming dental care, such as molar endodontics or prolonged periodontal gum treatments, let alone additional time for important areas such as prevention.”

‘There was a lot of negativity from certain members of the profession before the programme came out – they didn’t give it a chance’

Kilcoyne edged that – so don’t be surprised if there is a part II to this story!”

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Terrible statistics
Dr Kilcoyne continued: “It was really good when the programme directors left in my comments about the terrible statistics which show the third commonest reason for hospitalisation in England are doomed to a similar miserable, but avoidable, hand in England should do now before the upcoming dental pilots even begin, Dr Kilcoyne said: “Like the economic crisis caused by a lack of proper focus and prevention in banking, the Government had to admit the truth, it simply couldn’t fund everything as before, prioritisation and changes needed to be introduced to improve the situation overall etc. We need that same honest dialogue with the public too, such that NHS dentistry simply cannot provide for everyone’s clinical needs without limits and due to the economic climate, more funding is unlikely. I then think prevention needs to be a high priority as the Department of Health puts together its first National Prevention plan, focussing on children from birth.

Too much to ask?
Dr Kilcoyne added: “Thus whilst too much to ask? Dr Kilcoyne continued: “Like the economic crisis caused by a lack of proper focus and prevention in banking, the Government had to admit the truth, it simply couldn’t fund everything as before, prioritisation and changes needed to be introduced to improve the situation overall etc. We need that same honest dialogue with the public too, such that NHS dentistry simply cannot provide for everyone’s clinical needs without limits and due to the economic climate, more funding is unlikely. I then think prevention needs to be a high priority as the Department of Health puts together its first National Prevention plan, focussing on children from birth.

Undercover element
“The programme was, of course, sensational and biased against dentists since this is what is thought to attract audiences. The undercover element was underhand but is routinely used in investigative journalism. The dentists recorded were ‘bending the rules’ but the dentist pronouncing on their conduct could have been more balanced and discussed the role of the NHS contract in encouraging such behaviour. ‘Feedback from colleagues is that [the programme] was unbalanced but not to the extent that they expected. Feedback on my contribution has been generally favourable, in that it was considered professional, provided some balance and my contribution was truthful and accurate. I have received no direct feedback on the programme from patients but I have contact. I also received requests for my help from patients experiencing dental problems! I understand that feedback from contract pilots on the programme has been favourable and much discussed on Facebook (apparently) but they expressed concern that the programme provided an unbalanced view.”

Having watched the programme, dentist Ian Gordon said: “It is often uncomfortable for a profession to be subjected to journalistic scrutiny. It takes real courage to be interviewed for a programme such as Dispatches, there is always the risk of being misrepresented. “Overall I feel the programme was balanced informative and revealed nothing more than what I would have expected. My only criticism of the dentists who were interviewed would be reserved for Dr Anthony Halperin, the expert witness, who dismissed molar RCT as a simple procedure. This was unfair and disingenuous. Dentists can make RCT straightforward with years of experience and with use of additional equipment, but it is always a procedure with uncertain outcomes even in the most expert of hands.

“The programme highlighted the enormous difficulty of offering private treatment to NHS patients especially for RCT and patient with perhaps two or three failing crowns and a broken filling or two and a loose CoCr denture round practices for treatment planning - the various treatment plans obtained and the reason for the prescribed treatment would have been interesting to see.”

Dr Gordon continued: “In 2006 I founded CHALLENGE along with Eddie Crouch and John Benshaw, We campaigned against nGDS and predicted all the outcomes that we now know blight the dental service. Deskilling, supervised neglect, gaming, PCT inflexibility... it was all obvious. “I suggested at LDC conference in 2008 that extractions had increased and roof fillings decreased. At the time the CDO challenged this and said right up to the point when the Coalition criticised the contract, with good reason, for all its failings. He listened but never acted on my advice. So far the new contract is, in fact, as the PCTs evolve they have become less flexible and more difficult in their dealings with dentists, even the offers of support proposals for pilots and we all welcome that change is on the horizon.

“However change is at least three years away, three years of the same contract, UDA and tariffs. Without me they would not have had eight years of uNGDS, four under Labour and four under the Coalition. Surely now they are committed to abolishing the UDA they must do something to relax targets and address some of the perverse incentives of the contract, some of the incentives dispatches identified.

“...So whilst the BDA must continue to work with the DH on the pilots they must not forget this is 62 practices out of 10,000. They are the same contract, UDA and tariffs now and if the profession must improve its image by delivering the care patients need. Far from as I have said but without a change in the contract and support from the DH nothing will change.”

Another dentist, Simon Thackeray, said: “I think it’s about time the gaming was exposed. The title of the programme was unfair, but other than that the gaming was dealt with very well. This is more than done but without a change in the contract and support from the DH nothing will change.”

Agressive stance
“I feel that those who are providing for example scales privately rather than on the NHS should not have signed the new contract. You cannot have your cake and eat it, and I feel the PCTs should have taken a more aggressive stance in the past to stamp out this gaming. I hope now that this is stamped out, and the practices that are doing this realise that instead of hiding behind the lack of knowledge of the public, they become open and honest about who is funding the treatment and how.

He added: “I am also concerned that the concept of full lists is being used to stop patients accessing the service. There is no registration, no privacy, no consent, no full list. If a patient needs a dentist the contract obliges you to take them on as a patient. This factory model is the reason why I refused to sign the contract and converted in 2005. But that’s for another day and another... Dispatches programme probably.”