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 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 1.1m 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 may 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 profession before the programme came out – they didn’t give it a chance.

Honesty and integrity

“The reason the dentists featured were chosen were 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.”

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Terrible statistics
Dr Kilcoyne continued: “I was really pleased the programme directors left in my comments about the terrible statistics which show the third commonest reason for hospitalisation in the next three to five years too!”

When asked what the Department of Health 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. Well, we need that same contract, UDA and targets left in my comments about the terrible statistics which show the third commonest reason for hospitalisation in the next three to five years too!”

Dr Gordon continued: “In 2006 I founded CHALLENGE along with Eddie Crouch and John Ben- shaw, 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 confer- ence in 2008 that extractions had increased and root fill- ings decreased. At the time the CDO challenged this and said there was always the risk of being misquoted and misrepresented. Having watched the pro- gramme, 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, and the programme was, of course, sensational and biased against dentists since this is what is thought to attract audiences.”

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 under- hand but is routinely used in investigative journalism. The den- tists 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 encour- aging such behaviour: ‘Feedback from colleagues is that [the programme] was unbalanced and to the extent that they expected. Feedback on my contribution has been generally favourable, in that it was consid- ered professional, provided some balance and the content was truthful and accurate. I have re- ceived no direct feedback on the programme from patients but I have contact. I also re- quests for my help from patients experiencing dental problems! I understand that feedback from the dental environment is the only contribution that has been favourable and much discussed on Facebook (appar- ently) but they expressed concern about the programme provided an unbalanced view.”

There was no evidence of bias. Yet Dispatches quotes a 54 per cent increase in extractions. In a civilised country where dental health is supposed to be improving this is a horrific statistic. "Of course there were issues but these were policed by data monitoring, we have a far greater problem with under treatment and lack of prevention than we ever had with over treat- ment before. As a profession we have to do something NOW.”

Change on horizon
“The CDO sometimes seemingly singlehandedly supported nGDS patient with perhaps two or three failing crowns and a broken fill- ing or two and a loose CoGd den- ture round practices for treatment planning - the various treatment plans obtained and the reason for the prescribed treatment would have been interesting to see.”

Professor of Primary Dental Care at King’s College London Dental Institute Stephen Dunne, who was featured in the programme discussing the type of dental disease he was treating in the hospital, said: “I agreed (with much trepidation) to take part in the programme to try to inform Dispatches team and to encourage a more bal- anced programme than I feared might be the case without my contribution. I spent several hours recording with the Dis- patches team and gave a full ac- count of the advantages and limi- tations of the previous ‘Fee per Item’ contract, the ‘New’ contract and the proposals for the future NHS contract. I shared my views on Dental Bodies Cor- porate and concerns about the future funding of NHS dentistry. What you saw and heard was what remained of my recording! However, the write up by Sam Lister in The Times on Saturday (despite the mis-quotation), the Dispatches website article and the television programme were, I believe, more balanced after my input than they would otherwise have been. I would, naturally, have preferred that more of my comments had been included.

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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 can be asked to be admitted.

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 serv- ice. There is no registration, no wait, no full list. If a patient needs a den- tist the contract obliges you to take them on as a patient. This fact is the reason why I refused to sign the contract and converted in 2005. But that’s for another day and an- other. The Dispatches programme probably...”

To be continued...