Pilots designed to test the proposed changes to the new dental contract have been delayed from an initial start date of April until sometime during the summer. This hold up has been the result of delays in the implementation of necessary software and IT training.

Mid-summer

Also, regulations for the governance of the pilots need drafting. In a letter to participating practices from David Lye, Assistant Director, Dental and Eye Care Services, Department of Health, he reports that suppliers expect the software to be up and running by mid-summer.

In the meantime, commissioners and providers will receive IT training on the implications, roles and responsibilities in managing the financial and contractual implications of the pilot.

The new software being implemented across the pilot sites will support the Dental Quality and Outcomes Framework (DQOF) underpinning the trials, which will assess the quality of the work being carried out and the clinical outcomes used to calculate remuneration; for the first time this will be based on patient care rather than on the number of procedures being carried out.

The software being implemented will allow efficient data collection and reporting. Support and training will be provided to pilot sites, which will include clear clinical definitions, for example active decay and BPE (basic periodontal examination). Training will also be provided on the use of the oral health assessment.

According to the Department of Health, monitoring and evaluation will be a continuous process throughout the life of the pilots, which will help to inform the utility of the proposed measures and their subsequent development for inclusion in the new contract.

Continuity of care

The pilots have been designed to improve the quality of patient care and increase access to NHS dental services, with the added objective of improving the oral health of children. The contract aims to reward dentists for the continuity and quality of care provided to patients, instead of the number of treatments undertaken.

In December 2010 it was announced that the trials would start in April 2011, however last week the Department of Health announced that the pilots will begin in the summer across 62 practices in England which have been selected to participate. According to Ben Atkins, Clinical Director of participating practice Revive Dental Care, the delay in the pilots has not resulted in an inconvenience: “The proposals of these pilots mean a change in mindset as it is a totally new system. However, we have received full support over the training issues. I can understand why [the Department of Health] would want to delay the start date as they won’t want to get it wrong.”

Get it right

Health Minister Lord Howe commented: “It is important that we take our time to get this absolutely right. We want our reforms to give dentists the encouragement they are looking for to provide a service that meets the needs of today’s population, and which fosters positive habits from an early age.” “This approach is not only better for patients, but also a better use of NHS resources.”

He added. Each model being piloted will be slightly different in order to provide information and evidence on various aspects of the proposals; this will help inform better the development of the new national contract. Months of preparation have gone into the pilots.

Professor Jimmy Steele, who was a member of the National Steering Group that developed the proposals, said: “The Adult Dental Health Survey showed further improvements in oral health in England. We now need an NHS dental service to match; one that maintains good oral health as well as providing appropriate treatment. The dental contract pilots will explore how best to make this a reality but it is important to get it right, so time spent setting this up properly is time well spent.”

The British Dental Association has indicated their approval of the proposed changes and hope that problems created by the current arrangements will be addressed. They also stress the importance of making sure that all areas are covered before starting the pilots.

John Milne, Chair of the BDA’s general Dental Practice Committee, said: “The profession is working closely with the Department of Health and we are pleased to see that progress towards beginning the pilots is being made. Dentists who have been selected to participate and primary care trusts are being kept up to date with developments and training on aspects of the pilots including IT arranged.

Taking opportunity

“It’s important that this training, and indeed the whole process, is given the time it needs. These pilots must not be rushed. They are an opportunity to get NHS dentistry back on track. That opportunity must be taken.”

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