

# 12 Days of Christmas

Here, DPAS presents an alternative version of the traditional seasonal song



It may well be the season to be jolly, but the situation faced by many NHS dentists this Christmas is no laughing matter.

In just a few months time (April 2009) PCTs will be freed of their obligation to offer dentists NHS contracts and with many already facing financial penalties from the first two years of their contracts there is little to be cheery about this Christmas.

This April, the industry is bracing itself for another swathe of NHS dentists shifting to the private sector.

For those that have given some thought about making

the move to independence but are still a little unsure as to move things forward, here are a few festive tips to help you...

#### **On the first day of Christmas... lay the ghosts of Christmas past to rest**

Twenty years ago, a move from the NHS to independence would have been a very scary prospect.

However, nowadays, this should not present too much of a problem to most dental practitioners, given the change in patient expectations, especially to those who sensibly prepare for such a move.

#### **On the second day of Christmas... write your Christmas wishlist**

Make a list of all the things that you want to change and the reasons as to why these are important to you, your team, your practice and your patients. These changes may necessitate a change of mindset, that dentists and their practice team, (and indeed their patients), should find enlightening.

#### **On the third day of Christmas... go Christmas shopping**

Once you have determined what it is that you would like to change, now you need to shop around and find the most

suitable organisations to support you. In choosing a payment plan provider, dentists should consider the balance between using a nationally branded plan – where patient familiarity may prove to be a comfort – against the advantages of building the practice identity under a practice-branded plan with the inherent cost-savings in taking such a route.

#### **On the fourth day of Christmas... spend time with the family**

It is essential that the practice team understand the reasons for the change, and support this move to the hilt. Certainly, in the earlier days of independent dentistry, negative attitudes on occasion undermined much of the positive planning. However, nowadays there is a far greater expectation that this is the way that things are going, and there should be much less resistance to a conversion to private practice. Stepping off the NHS treadmill will undoubtedly allow for a far less stressful way of working for the whole practice team, and a move to private practice could be structured so that they benefit from increased pay and conditions. Team training and communications are essential to a successful conversion.

#### **On the fifth day of Christmas... five golden rules!**

Plan, consult, communicate, action, deliver

#### **On the sixth day of Christmas... put up the decorations**

The most important consideration in such a change is to understand that patients – many of who still consider the NHS as being 'free' – if being asked to pay for private dentistry will expect to see a change in the service they receive.

Naturally, the fast-process treadmill that is created by the NHS contract should be replaced by longer, less stressful appointment times, where the patient can appreciate the transformation in the way that they are treated.

There should also be an obvious change in 'the patient experience', such as improved facilities or new high tech equipment.

Your staff will also thank you for improving their work environment and you'll be amazed at the difference a bright, modern working environment makes.

#### **On the seventh day of Christmas... check your Christmas card list**

Before making a move, ensure that you fully evaluate your patient base. It is likely that the practice will need to see fewer patients than under nGDS,

However, in planning your conversion, it makes sense to examine your patient base – it can be easy to over-estimate by counting many rare-attendees, and this could have an effect on your fee setting.

#### **On the eighth day of Christmas... send out messages of goodwill**

The clarity of communications to your patients is most important. Your dental plan provider will help in producing a straightforward patient letter that explains why you feel that converting to private practice is the only way forward, and which explains what action they have to take.

Having clear and concise patient information leaflets on your plan also helps with the whole transition, and can help to build the value of your business.

In order to maximise the efficiency of the patient mailing, it is essential that the detail of your patient data – that is, names and addresses, dates of birth, family groupings, etc – is as accurate as possible. A stitch in time...

#### **On the ninth day of Christmas... choose your turkey**

The structure of funding that the new private practice is to choose is much like a restaurant choosing its menu – get it wrong and you're stuffed!

Many have gone unthinkingly down the Private Fee Per Item route (PFPI). However, this can prove dangerous where fee rates are set too low, and which do not allow for the fact that the frequency of patient attendance is likely to fall significantly when they are being asked to pay privately for each visit.

An ideal way of encouraging the frequency of patient attendance – and thus the opportunity to carry out higher margin treatment – is to offer a range of private dental plans.

Once patients are paying regularly by direct debit, whether under full capitation, maintenance only or indeed, practice membership plans for PFPI patients, the likelihood of their frequent attendance is secured, and patient retention is addressed.

#### **On the tenth day of Christmas... speak to the three wise men!**

Discuss the move with your accountant, your bank manager and your plan provider. They should be involved in making sure that your dental plan charges and your PFPI fees are set at the correct level.

You should ensure that you

have allowed for the cost of – and made arrangements for – private pension provision.

With their help, you should also be able to arrange a structured finance package, whether to assist in paying off any nGDS clawback suffered, or to invest in your private business. This could just mean sprucing up the waiting rooms, or it could entail a significant level of investment in new equipment, again in order to raise the service delivery to your patients.

#### **On the eleventh day of Christmas... invite friends over for a drink**

Discuss the implications of this change with friends and colleagues in the profession.

Many dentists who have converted over the last 20 years are only too pleased to be able to offer encouragement and specific advice.

For the internet-minded, joining the Yahoo Group GDP-UK allows contact with a broad range of experiences in this respect.

Whatever your practice circumstances, there are dentists who have converted under similar, if not more difficult positions.

#### **On the twelfth day of Christmas... don't leave everything to the Twelfth Day!**

Taking all of these issues on board, and getting the whole practice team prepared, takes time.

The most important tip of all – given the uncertainties of nGDS and compounding clawback over the next few months – is this – DO NOT LEAVE YOUR PREPARATIONS UNTIL IT IS TOO LATE. You should be planning your move now, as to be doing so at the last minute whilst stressed out from the nGDS ratcheted treadmill is not something that I would recommend.

By way of encouragement, the most frequent comments I hear from dentists who have converted from the NHS are about how their working lifestyle, and that of their practice team, has improved

- If you would like more information on how to go private, you can contact DPAS on 01747 870910 or visit [www.dpas.co.uk](http://www.dpas.co.uk)

Andrew Warren is sales and marketing director at DPAS. He joined DPAS in 1997, after it was founded in 1996 by chairman Quentin Skinner, to better support dental practices with their own independent, practice-branded payment plan administration services, including the arrangement of dental insurance for patients. Andrew has since helped build DPAS's expertise in supporting forward-thinking dental practices in offering a range of dental plans under their own identity and control. With more hands-on experience in converting dental practices to private plans than perhaps anyone else in the business, Andrew has had a leading role in the establishment and growth of the private dental plan sector in the UK. A former dental technician, Andrew has a deep understanding of the particular challenges facing the UK dental industry as it continues to move through a period of fundamental change.