

Hold on to your hats

Quentin Skinner contemplates a new year gift for dentistry



News comment

Quentin Skinner,
chairman of DPAS

Well, what a year it has been – and what is in store ahead of us? Doom and gloom everywhere in Europe and beyond, with cold winds whistling down every alley.

After two or three years of clear pay cuts in real terms for NHS dentists, the Chancellor now announces a further two years of 1% pay rises for the public sector, whilst inflation is still running at 4-5%. Increased costs due to HTM 01-05 and CQC regulation exacerbate this position, not just for NHS dentistry, but also for the private sector which has seen a squeeze on private dental revenue, at least as far as fee per item patients are concerned. The dental profession is besieged on all sides, with the press, the public and the Department of Health seeing it as a fair target for a good kicking. There is plenty of opportunity for this all to be amplified with the forthcoming Office of Fair Trading investigation into dentistry. This investigation is wide-ranging, and without a doubt there will be further criticism of dentists of some kind or another in their report, due out in the spring.

Looking at all of this, it seems remarkably unlikely that any future prospects for NHS dentistry are going to offer dentists a rosy way forwards, and Austerity will be the word. The days of UDA rates of over £30 must surely be numbered, and anyone who thinks that the NHS pilot

projects are going to bring a better future for dentists must surely be living in Cloud Cuckoo Land.

So, is there anything out there to take a shred of comfort from? Well, in the cause of seasonal cheer, I believe there is, at least for one section of the profession. The one upside of this downside situation that we all find ourselves in is the continuation of low interest rates. There is a significantly high correlation of patients who opt for funding their dentistry via private dental plans with those members of the public who have mortgages.

Whilst the economic situation took a dive in 2008-2010, actually many dental plan patients have been in a comparatively good situation as their mortgage interest has given them an unexpected cashflow bonanza. And looking at whether dental plan patients have been cancelling due to the economic circumstances in the same way as fee-per-item patients have been delaying their visits to their practices, I have to say that the cancellation statistics show that such patients represent much 'stickier business' for their dentists.

As far as the OFT investigation goes, I believe it is vital for all of you to make strong representations (and get any influential patients to do so as well) to the OFT to ensure that you get a fair hearing. The OFT is taking evidence from the GDC, the BDA and the CQC, so perhaps you have nothing to fear? I, for my part, am making strong representations to the OFT on behalf of dentists who provide their services to their patients using private dental plans as the funding method that produces the optimal outcome for their patients.

Maybe we will get a fair hearing, but the wind is blowing cold.