

Can the pilot fly?

Quentin Skinner examines the aims of the upcoming new contract trials

So finally, 62 dental practices have been selected to run trials of three new variations of the next new dental contract. With a desire to base the national contract on the tripartite principles of registration, capitation and quality, the coalition is taking its time in offering any sort of enlightenment as to future dental services. So, is this strategy justified? To plan, execute on a trial basis, and cogitate before forcing NHS provision into yet another series of reforms? Or would we all just be better off if someone made a quick, firm decision one way or the other?

It is an inevitable fact of life that the way dentists are remunerated affects the way in which they deliver clinical care and the government's desire to understand this motivation is, at least, realistic. And, despite the fact that the pilots are heavily weighted toward capitation, there is, in the pilot proposals, a nod in the direction of quality and patient outcomes and a definite movement towards provision for the less well off in society. 'Quality payments' will account for 10% of contract value, and within this 10% will be for safety, 60% will be based on clinical outcomes and 30% allocated for the 'patient experience'!

The three simultaneous sets of pilots will test a capitation-based contract, a weighted capitation and quality model and, finally, a weighted capitation and quality model but one that will cover only routine care



News comment

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and treatment with a separately identified budget for more complex, higher cost treatments (defined as treatment involving the services of a dental laboratory).

The criteria for quality is what concerns me most in this scenario. Surely, one person's quality care is another person's supervised neglect? There are many patients for whom a successful experience at the dentist is one where they don't have to have any treatment done. Will a dentist who routinely does little or no clinical work receive top marks for the 'patient experience'?

The pilots are expected to run for one year with the intention being to launch the new contract in April 2014, subject to Parliamentary approval.

So, now we wait... Andrew Lansley is due to address the profession at the BDA Conference later this month and doubtless will be bracing himself following his recent interrogation at the Royal College of Nurses Conference where he was accused of not having the 'guts' to face their conference en masse. Hopefully, his appearance will result in some clear, unambiguous direction for the profession, something we have been lacking for quite some time, but let's not hold our breath...