

Control your destiny

Andrew Warren urges principals to take control.

I'm a bit of a 'glass half full man' myself and following the gloom and doom predications that signalled the onset of the recession, I have been pleasantly surprised by the reality of general dental practice in the past year or so. Admittedly, there has been some drop-off in elective treatments, whitening, veneers and such, but on the whole the environment I experience, speaking with practices from all four corners of the UK, is that it could have been worse.

The poor weather at the start of the year certainly had an impact in terms of increasing FTAs but in general, practices appear to have managed this situation by concentrating on

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developing more rigorous recall procedures that make it difficult for patients to slip through the net.

Of course, as you would expect with my background in dental payment plans, I am a great advocate of the role dental plans can play in providing a stable financial foundation for a practice. I can often be heard preaching that one of the main advantages of having a payment plan is that patients find it more difficult to avoid attendance. The knowledge they are paying for routine appointments

is often the only encouragement they need to keep attending regularly and the indications from our own client practices certainly bears this out.

One issue that has affected practices in the past year has been their reluctance to increase prices during the economic downturn. This response to redundancy in the wider workforce and reductions in public spending in the economy can be seen as a logical reaction, but the natural increases in overheads, wages and so on, have resulted in a squeezing of margins and a reduction in profitability for many private and mixed practices.

When income is squeezed the natural and common-sense reaction is to try and identify where cost savings can be made and, just like the Government's current spending review, a number of practices I have spoken to in the last 12 months have undertaken a spending review of their own. Ensuring you are receiving value for money from all suppliers is a worthwhile exercise at any time but particularly if revenues have slipped a little. Making sure the additional services you might be paying for as part of an overall 'wrapper' is a reasonable business procedure. My advice to practices I speak with is to make sure any additional services you are paying for are:

- being delivered, and
- of value to your practice commensurate with the amount you are paying for them.

I have come across a number of practices who, when they have undertaken this review have realised the 'one size fits all' approach of some companies means certain elements



your dental plans

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of their package are little used or, worse still, are of no relevance to their practice. Dentists are not a single homogenous mass and although companies try to customise various solutions there is always a compromise somewhere along the way.

The clinical independence of the profession is a cornerstone of our system and dentists have the confidence and authority to recommend and carry out treatments for the benefit of their patients. The same should be true of the business aspects of a practice. Making sure you are receiving services which guarantee best value means you are able to pass on these benefits to your patients, making it easier for them to access your services at a reasonable cost.

As we wait for the outcome of the spending review later this month and hunger for more 'meat on the bones' of where dentistry sits in the pecking order of Government plans for the NHS, the profession needs to be proactive in terms of taking control of their own future. Most principals either in, or considering a move to private practice, do so because they have a desire to remain in control of their own destiny without being at the whim of Government policy of whatever shade. ■



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