

Unfair pay award? Not necessarily...

It depends on what end of the UDA scale you're at, says Quentin Skinner



News comment

Quentin Skinner,
chairman of DPAS

So, Andrew Lansley has awarded dentists 0.5% as a rise to their gross fees for 2011/12. This is at a time when general inflation (RPI) is running at 5%, and the pressure on earnings inflation continues apace. No allowance is made for general increases in dental inflation, both in the cost of materials and in provision for HTM 01-05 requirements. Oh, and what about CQC regulation? The cost for a practice to ensure that it is fully complying this year, alongside the annual registration fee, takes care of this magnanimous increase in one fell swoop.

The BDA is absolutely correct when it describes this award as a pay cut. So, is this unfair? Surely it seems so when compared to other public sector areas. Who can name another group operating in the public sector who have had successive significant pay cuts for three years in a row? Does this not seem as if the dental profession is being unfairly picked on in some serially vindictive way? Perhaps, or it may be that this outcome is particularly unfair on a significant sector of the profession, whilst being perfectly reasonable in the case of others.

It has always seemed to me that any view about anything regarding the dental profession that looks at the average position is certain to mask a very significant disparity in the reality on the ground. For one group of dentists that think strongly about something, another believes the opposite. It has always seemed to me that few dentists exist who sit fairly and squarely in the middle ground.

Well, the system that devised the UDA presided over an equally diverse range of dentists, inputs and outcomes, whilst arriving at the reality of nGDS. There were plenty of hard working practitioners providing NHS dentistry in 2005 just as they had been doing, and as they have continued to do so since. It seems that there were plenty of others working just as hard, if not even harder, to ensure that they maximised their earnings in the 'test year' before the new contract values were established. The Department of Health (DH) is of course aware that post-April 2006 complex laboratory work reduced dramatically, by definition leaving plenty of dentists earning far more than the system envisaged.

Thus one reads of NHS dentists netting more than

£300,000pa, and sees from NASDA's figures that NHS dentists earn – on average – significantly more than private dentists. There can be no doubt that there are plenty of dentists who are earning far more under the NHS than the DH ever intended, and thus it is not surprising that there has been a succession of real terms fee cuts over the last few years.

Thus, for those dentists who managed to boost their pre-contract earnings and enjoy a subsequent high earnings stream with lower associated costs – and of course there is no legal reason why they should not have put themselves into this position – this and previous awards cannot be viewed as unfair.

However, a rise of just 0.5%, along with the previous desultory awards over the last couple of years, for those practitioners on below average UDAs is remarkably unfair. Generally speaking, I suspect that many of these are less likely to speak out in protest than others, and they are seeing their net earnings steadily being ground away.

What is decidedly unfair is the UDA structure, with all of the disparity it brought based on the working patterns in the 'test year', which results in UDA value ranges in individual PCT areas that are commonly between £16 and £45, for the same work carried out. Such a disparity may have been defensible as part of a brief transition period, but this has now been going on for five years. In that time, plenty of dentists have been providing NHS dentistry and been very well rewarded, but for each of these there are others at the other end of the UDA scale, for whom these averaged awards can only be described as dismal.

What is needed is for the whole UDA structure to be revised by reducing this disparity, by bringing down these higher values sharply towards the average, whilst offering more reasonable inflationary increases to those below the average. This should not wait until the new pilots have run their course.

If such changes need to be ordered by the secretary of state, then so be it.