Dental visits are ‘intimidating’

Even for a dentist, being a dental patient is an intimidating experience, according to Professor Jimmy Steele, who is leading an independent review into NHS dentistry in England.

The review group has been asked to report on increasing access across the country, improving quality of services and suggesting long-term government work towards reducing oral health inequalities.

Professor Steele, who is the chair in Oral Health Services Research at the School of Dental Sciences in Newcastle, has revealed in his latest update on the review, his views on being a patient and how difficult it is to determine the quality of dental surgery.

Professor Steele claims he is ‘not a very good dental patient’ and admitted: ‘For a start, I don’t go to the dentist very often, and for a dentist that is probably not unusual (I think we perhaps believe, in my case quite incorrectly, that we are immune to dental problems).

When I do go I talk a lot, I want to see what is going on and I do not mind admitting that I don’t like it very much at all; I am nervous.’

Part of the problem is that dentists having treatment ‘know exactly what to expect, I can picture the procedure in some detail and I trust the person treating me to do an excellent job, but that does not stop me wanting to be somewhere else rather than in the dental chair. Even for a dentist, being a dental patient is an intimidating experience.’

One of the things the review team will be examining over the next few weeks is ‘quality’. Quality can be defined in a myriad of ways, according to Professor Steele, but he added: ‘If the NHS is offering a dental service, it needs to do what it does well. Trying to describe the makeup of a high quality service in this, sometimes intimidating, environment of a dental surgery is not easy. I suppose my point is that patients may feel quite differently about what a quality service is when they are in the surgery compared to when they are not.’

He also believes that a dentist may have a very different version of quality than a patient.

‘As a patient I want a quick, painless experience. As a dentist I know that a good outcome may take a little longer and that to avoid more visits or possibly discomfort in the future, some investment of time at the beginning may be sensible. The NHS needs to balance these two points of view (and many more) and to make sure that all the right checks and balances are in place to ensure that the result is, indeed, a high quality service,’ he said.

There are some elements that are easy for dental patients to judge, according to Professor Steele.

These are a clean and safe environment, polite staff and ease of access.

However he claims there are other aspects of quality that is difficult or impossible for a patient to evaluate such as the safe operation of x-ray machines, the detail of cross infection control, the accuracy of information given and the clinical validity of approaches taken to treatment planning or to preventing disease.

He believes the effectiveness of that most important skill, the communication of advice about a difficult subject in difficult circumstances, is particularly challenging as it requires both the skill of communication and a strong medical ethic to ensure that the patient is able to make the decision that is best suited to them.

He added: ‘Perhaps the most difficult of all to evaluate is the technical quality of the decision making of the dentist, the dental care provided and the likely longevity of any work done.’

Data on doctors and hospitals is available to the general public. Professor Steele feels this is a good thing but only if the data is meaningful and is asking dentists for their views on the pitfalls and advantages of this.

More NHS dentistry

A new NHS dental surgery in Wirral is hoping to make up for the lack of NHS provision in the area.

Glenside Dental Practice in Pensby, which is opening in April, already has over 1,000 patients registered. David Speechley, of Glencairn Dental Practice, Bebington, and his colleague Simon Wright, is opening the new surgery with Mike Stoker, from Hessey Road Dental Practice, Wallasey.

Mr Speechley said: ‘We hope that this new collaborative initiative will help to provide the people of Pensby and the surrounding areas with a high-quality, friendly service, under the terms of the NHS.’

He claims that the surgery has the potential to expand. The practice in Pensby Road, which will be one of 55 other NHS surgeries in Wirral, will also provide dental implants and some extensive cosmetic dentistry on a private basis.

MP Stephen Hesford has welcomed the new NHS provision.