On 15th March Health Ministers faced oral questions and those not answered in the House receive a written answer. One such was this:

11. Mark Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment she has made of the level of access to NHS dentistry.

And the answer: Ms Rosie Winterton: Access to NHS dentistry is increasing.—in April 2006, primary care trusts had commissioned 73 million annual units of dental activity; by January 2007 that had increased to 78.4 million.

Some oral questions are specific, but the first one tends to be general as Mark Hunter’s was. The Department then has to guess what is worrying the MP, because the second question will be the real one, what is bugging the MP. It may well be a constituency problem and then other MPs, including the shadow secretary of state can join in with the others. The Minister can well be put on the spot.

Normally question number 11 would be reached but on that day, in answer to earlier questions backbench Labour MPs spun out the debate. Consequently Rosie Winterton’s awkward questioning was not reached, indeed she didn’t speak at all. There is a play going on in London’s West End called ‘Whipping it up’ which demonstrates what goes on in the Whips office where these tactics are planned.

To find out how the questioning might have progressed, go to Mark Hunter’s website where he posted this. “Today (15th March 2007), Mark Hunter MP for Cheadle questioned the Secretary of State for Health about the lack of dental provision in Cheadle and across the country. In 1999 the Prime Minister pledged that by September 2001 everyone would have access to a NHS dentist, wherever they lived. Eight years later less more half of British adults are not registered with a NHS dentist, according to the British Dental Association.”

Commenting after Health questions, Mark Hunter said, “The level of NHS dentistry both in Cheadle and nationally is scandalous. It is appalling that after ten years of Labour government many of my constituents still cannot get access to an NHS dentist. It is obviously a situation that is not improving, as my postbag shows, I have received numerous letters from constituents who are shocked when their dentist stops accepting them as an NHS patient, and then find it impossible to find another dentist in the area who will take them on. This situation is totally unacceptable and has been the case for far too long. It is time for the Government to do something about this and keep their promise of NHS dental provision for all, wherever they live.”

In written questions Mr Watson the MP for Eastbourne asked how many dentists had exhausted their 2006-07 NHS budgets. In an interesting reply Rosie Winterton said that PCTs did not award dental providers an annual budget but an annual contract value—a sub distinction that may have escaped you. “Service levels may be defined by an annual number of units of dental activity or they may include service outputs that cannot be measured through courses of treatment” that makes sense to you. She went on PCTs, as the commissioning bodies, are responsible for monitoring the delivery of services by their local dental providers.

An Early Day Motion is an opportunity to test the water of opinion in the House of Commons by seeing how many MPs sign up to it. Graham Stuart MP has put down the following about orthodontics: “That this House notes with concern the geographical inequality in the provision of orthodontic care and the shortage of training places for orthodontic specialists; further notes that one fifth of orthodontic specialists are due to retire in the next six years; further notes that a shortage of specialists is driving patients to consult practitioners who have insufficient training and experience; further notes that there are only two orthodontic specialists serving the whole of Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire; and supports the British Orthodontic Society’s call for the Government to increase the number of funded training posts in U.K. dental schools.” So far it has attracted 13 signatures.

Westminster week

NHS Dentistry in Crisis

After a year of the new contract, CHALLENGE has reported that NHS dentistry is perilously close to collapse, contrary to what Chief Dental Officer for England, Dr Barry Cockcroft would have people believe. CHALLENGE is a pressure group dedicated to returning NHS dentistry to some semblance of sanity and has carried out a survey of dentists to find out their views and to reveal the truth.

Which? claims NHS dentistry is a postcode lottery

A year on from the start of new NHS dentists’ contracts in England, research by Which? has revealed huge regional variations in the availability of NHS dentistry, as well as a continuing lack of practitioners taking on new patients.

A total of 466 dentistry practices across all 10 strategic health authorities in England were contacted between 6th and 10th November 2006. Fieldworkers posing as potential dental patients planning to move to the area contacted the dental practices asking for information about being taken on as a new NHS patient. No appointments were made.

The research shows that just over a third of dental practices (36 per cent) are taking on any new NHS patients; no significant improvement since 2005 when the figure was 51 per cent. In some parts of the country, the figure is even lower.

People living in the north west of England are less likely than average to have access to NHS dentistry—just 15 per cent of dental practices are taking on any new NHS patients. Residents of Yorkshire and Humberside (15 per cent) and south central England (16 per cent) are also worse off than most. The areas shown to be worse are north east England (3 per cent) and south west England (8 per cent). In some parts of the country, the figure is even lower.

Almost two thirds of practices not taking on NHS patients offered advice on how to find an NHS dentist:

26% suggested calling NHS Direct
19% suggested another dentist
17% suggested calling the PCT.

Lift Dem health spokeswoman Sandra Gidley told BBC Online: “It is totally unacceptable that so many patients do not have access to an NHS dentist.” Andrew Lansley, shadow health sec-

retary, added: “The new contract and local commissioning bodies are failing to deliver the promise that were made, and as a result many patients are finding that they cannot get access to it.”

But Health Minister Rosie Winterton said the old system had been ‘deeply flawed’ with ‘gaps in access’. She added: “Thanks to the reforms, PCTs now have the power and money to improve and develop local dental services, and are now turning the corner in improving access to dentistry.”