Westminster week
Prime Minister backs water fluoridation

At prime minister’s questions on March 26, Conservative MP and dentist Sir Paul Beresford asked Gordon Brown to confirm that he agreed with the need for fluoridation, and would he meet a delegation to discuss the changes needed to implement it.

The prime minister replied that he was personally very sympathetic to what Sir Paul had said and had seen the benefits of fluoridation himself. One reason for the Government putting extra money from the health budget into fluoridation was to encourage that to happen around the country. He added that he would be very happy to meet the proposed delegation. ‘It is a good thing for the teeth of the people of this country’ said the prime minister.

Health questions
Philip Hollobone, Conservative MP for Kettering had an oral question down for health ministers last month. He wanted a statement on access to NHS dentistry in both his constituency and England. The reply was given by the minister of state, Ben Bradshaw, who said that there had been an increase of seven per cent in the number of dentists in Northamptonshire last year; nationally there were 4,000 more dentists than in 1997, and investment in NHS dentistry has more than doubled.

Mr Hollobone pointed out, however, that according to the latest figures the number of patients in Northamptonshire seen by their dentist has fallen by 15,000 since the new dental contracts were introduced. He also pointed out that Northamptonshire primary care trust (PCT) had yet to undertake a needs assessment of children’s orthodontics. The minister urged the PCT to get on and do it. He also said there was now a requirement for all PCTs to increase, year on year, public access to NHS dentists. ‘There is no excuse for any PCT, including the hon. Gentleman’s, not to improve its results’, he said.

A friendly Labour back-bencher and fellow Devon MP, Linda Gilroy asked the minister to join her in congratulating Plymouth PCT, which a short time ago had 12,000 patients on its waiting list, but had turned things around and now had about 500 patients on it. The minister was happy to do this and also congratulated his own PCT (Exeter), which had halved the number of people on its waiting list in the past 12 months.

However the Conservative shadow dentistry minister, Mike Penning, attacked the minister for denying that there was a crisis in NHS dentistry, despite the evidence in the recent Patients Association report. ‘Whom should we believe’ he asked, ‘the Government or the Patients Association’. The minister said he would rather listen to the testimony of MPs, speaking from experience of their constituencies, and to the facts.

Given the introduction of the new contract, and the new investment that is now coming on stream in dentistry, I am afraid I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that not for much longer will he be able to say in the House that NHS dentistry is in crisis’, he concluded.