Survey: access is still biggest problem for PCTs

Commissioning survey by the British Dental Association shows growing experience of commissioning staff

Ensuring that people have access to NHS dentists is still one of the biggest problems for primary care trusts, according to a recent survey.

The 2010 British Dental Association (BDA) Local Commissioning Survey found that significant challenges remain for the commissioning of dentistry in England, despite the growing experience of commissioning staff and consensus on priorities.

The research found that access to care remains the top priority for primary care trusts (PCT) dental commissioning leads, with 89 per cent of PCTs naming it as one of their top three priorities. This echoes the findings of research by the British Dental Association in 2009. Quality was next, which appeared in the top three concerns of just over a quarter (28.4 per cent) of PCTs.

The research sought insight into the experience of PCT dental commissioning, staff commissioning and the level of support they enjoyed from strategic health authorities (SHAs), revisiting themes addressed by the 2009 research.

This year’s survey found that 61 per cent receive performance monitoring advice, 46 per cent contracting advice and guidance and 18 per cent receive support with their dental strategy.

The growing experience of dental commissioning staff is noticeable. Less than 10 per cent of those surveyed had been in their role for under a year according to the 2010 survey, while more than a quarter had served for such a short period in 2009.

However, many of the commissioning leads questioned this year said they did not have an adequate workforce.

Almost three-quarters said they needed additional support, with 18 per cent declaring they did not benefit from the expertise of a consultant in dental public health.

The research also identified significant under spending of dental budgets. Just under a fifth (16.4 per cent) of PCTs said they had spent less than 95 per cent of their ring fenced dental budgets. Just under a fifth (28.4 per cent) of PCTs had spent less than 95 per cent of their ring fenced budgets in 2009/10, although it is not clear whether the remaining funds were completely unspent or diverted to non-dental spending.

John Milne, chair of the BDA’s General Dental Practice Committee, said: “This research illustrates the challenges that persist with the commissioning of primary dental care and underlines some of the issues the national commissioning board will face when it assumes its duties.”

He added: “It is clear that whoever is responsible for commissioning dental care must be properly supported and have access to appropriate expertise.”

The experience and knowledge of consultants in dental public health and dental practice advisers are particularly valuable in helping PCTs provide effective care to patients. This study stresses the gradual accumulation of experience by PCTs. Arrangements for the handover of commissioning responsibility must seek to ensure that experience is not lost.”

Under the coalition government, the transfer of responsibility for dental commissioning will pass in 2012 from the PCTs to the national commissioning board.

It is not yet clear whether the board will have regional offices and, if it does, how these will be organised across the country.