Back-up accusations’ says BDA

T he British Dental Association is calling on the Department of Health to come up with evidence to substantiate its accusations that dentists are exploiting patients by calling them in for more check-ups than they need.

Current guidelines by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) say healthy patients do not need check-ups more than once every two years.

However chief dental officer Dr Barry Cockcroft claims some dentists are asking patients to return every six months.

He has also accused them of maximising their profits by splitting treatments which could be done in a single session, leading to more check-ups.

Dr Cockcroft said he is talking to primary care trusts (PCTs) to work out how to stop dentists spreading treatments across different appointments so they can make more money.

Responding to the accusations, Susie Sanderson, chair of the British Dental Association’s (BDA) executive board said: ‘The British Dental Association does not have the necessary data to comment on these suggestions. If the Department of Health does, it should share that information so that it can be investigated and better understood.

The interval between recalls is, according to NICE guidelines published in 2004 and supported by the BDA, a matter for a practitioner’s clinical judgement in consultation with the patient.

For adult patients, that interval is required to be between three and 24 months.’

Eddie Crouch, a Birmingham orthodontist agreed that ‘some dentists are finding the new contract more more and more UDA at a shrinking price.

He added: ‘Only an idiot would suggest that patients are being dragged into unnecessary treatment. It is grossly insulting to both patient and dentist to suggest that the first is so stupid as to not realise they are being conned and it’s insulting to suggest that dentists need to or would provide unnecessary treatment, especially NICE check-ups that don’t bring in that much money anyway.’

The BDA however claims that these figures supplied by NHS Information Centre fail to paint the whole picture.

Peter Ward, chief executive of the BDA said: ‘These figures do not tell the full story. They fail to take into account the clawing back of money from NHS dentists who have failed to meet the clawed treatment targets set for them. We know that almost half of the high street dentists across England and Wales could be subject to such clawback this year, and are currently facing an anxious wait to see whether and how they will be penalised.’

John Benshaw, former chair of the BDA, who refused to sign the new contract and left the NHS to go private after 37 years, said: ‘There can be no doubt that many practice owners have done well out of the new contract but they have reduced their own NHS commitment and found associates/performers to do the work for them at a fraction of the UDA (Units of Dental Activity) price. This will catch up with them in the future, but for the time being the owners are happy.

The same cannot be said about associates who are finding themselves under pressure to provide more and more UDA at a shrinking price.

He said: ‘The figures on earnings are not accurate as they are based on a year when payments to dentists were unusual due to the overlap of old and new contracts.

‘I do not think that unnecessary recalls are contributing to the increased earnings of dentists, but certainly attaining UDA targets is a way that dentists have hit targets and not necessarily increased costs.

It would be interesting to see how many of the dentists who favour the new contract would still feel like this, if such practice was re-examined by the PCTs and HCC, he added.’